THE NATURE AND SOURCES OF THE NONSENSE OF EDWARD LEAR.

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ABSTRACT :

The purpose of the thesis is to examine the distinctive nature of what Lear referred to as his " nonsense ",that is the whole of his writings for children,with particular reference to the longer verses, which I shall refer to as nonsense songs,to see what it is that makes this nonsense a particular form of literature,of language-use.
After an introduction outlining aims and structure,there are three main sections,subdivided.The first considers the sources of the nonsense, under the heading Romantic lyric,and then Nursery rhymes and word-games (the first is considered a broadly opposing influence to the second two,tending to expression of feeling and atmosphere as opposed to sheer diversity of invention),and a final section,before a conclusion, dealing with Lear's place in children's poetry,and the importance of contemporary beliefs with regard to this for his work.
The second part deals with critical approaches,first with the inadequate early habit of regarding his verse as poetic and sonorous but empty of content,then with the two main methods in this century,the first of which considers the nonsense as personally expressive,the second concentrating on its structure as a particular game with language.
Finally,to demonstrate the approach taken to the nonsense,there is a section of brief analyses of particular poems,and two prose pieces, chosen to illustrate different aspects of the nonsense,and because they have not been extensively treated in the body of the text.

Part One : Introduction.

The body of work under consideration is the whole of Lear's published nonsense,as contained in Holbrook Jackson's complete edition,and supplemented by the newly discovered pieces in Teapots and Quails (1),excluding those nonsenses whose content is predominately visual,like the Nonsense Botany, or the title sequence of Teapots and Quails,or purely occasional,such as the Eclogue written for Mr. and Mrs. John Addington Symonds.Most of our attention,however,will be focussed on the longer verse pieces - the Nonsense Songs - consisting of some twenty-two completed poems,and two fragments published in Teapots and Quails.The prose pieces,the limericks and the verses constituting the nonsense alphabets will all be drawn on mainly to exemplify the general processes of thought and feeling,and the ways of using language,that inform the nonsense songs,and with the exceptions of the two longish nonsense stories, The Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World and The History of the Seven Families of the Lake Pipple-Popple ,they will not be analysed for their own sakes.

Lear used the word "nonsense" to refer to his poetry, and in doing so,gave a new area of meaning to the word.However the choice of this term probably had more to do with Lear's need to disarm criticism than with the nature of his work as such, which is never incoherent,hard to understand or bereft of meaning, though it certainly tends to be playful,and to play with conventional perceptions and ways of using language to the point of standing them on their heads.For this reason, "nonsense" must,in this context,be considered as a technical term,referring solely to the unique form of poetry and prose invented by Lear, and not related in any important way to other kinds of statement

to which the term has been applied,either in a logical or a familiar sense.My aim has been to analyse the origins and nature of Lear's nonsense,considering it as a literary style with conventions peculiar to itself.

To do this I have approached the nonsense under two general headings.The first is the sources of the nonsense,and in this section I consider how Lear developed the nonsense from elements of the various sorts of literature with which he was familiar,comprising the Romantic lyric,folk-poetry,the Nursery Rhyme,previous children's literature,and word-games,the latter including punning,parody and humorous verse.The second section concerns methods of criticism,and their applicability to Lear's work,under the sub-headings of aesthetic criticism,biographical criticism,and a general type that,for lack of a better word,I term structural criticism,meaning those forms of criticism that have concentrated on the kinds of language use that distinguish the nonsense from other types of speech and of literature,or the structure of its imagery,rather than considering it as a form of expression.My purpose in this section is not to provide a comprehensive history of the criticism of Lear,whose volume is,in fact, fairly inconsiderable,but to try to determine something of the nature of the nonsense itself by judging the degree of usefulness of each approach.After these two sections concerned with the nonsense generally,I have tried to apply some of their findings in a final section devoted to analysis of specific pieces of the nonsense.

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(1) The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear , edited and introduced by Holbrook Jackson,(London : Faber & Faber Ltd., 1947; thirteenth impression,1975.)
Edward Lear, Teapots and Quails and other new nonsenses, edited and introduced by Angus Davidson and Philip Hofer, (London : John Murray, 1953).

PART TWO : SOURCES OF LEAR'S NONSENSE.

Part Two : Lear and the Romantic Lyric.

In The Romantic Imagination C.M.Bowra associates Lear (1) and Poe as embodiments of the last stage of the development of romantic lyricism.The comparison is a very suggestive one,and indeed sums up one aspect of Lear's work,particularly in the nonsense songs,and most particularly in the more Tennysonian of these, The Jumblies and Calico Pie from Nonsense Songs,Stories, Botany and Alphabets,and The Dong with a Luminous Nose, The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo, The Quangle Wangle's Hat, The Pobble Who Has No Toes, The Pelican Chorus and The Cummerbund from the later Laughable Lyrics.To understand Lear,it is necessary to see him in the context of the "serious" poetry from which he developed at least the metres and textures of most of his poems,to see him,that is,as an heir of Byron and Shelley,a contemporary of Tennyson and an older contemporary of Swinburne. Among his juvenilia there are pieces of Byronic lyric that (2) suggest a possible development as a very slight but entirely serious Victorian Romantic lyricist.But the interaction between this literary style and Lear's personality was such as to make this impossible,and there is no record of his writing entirely serious lyric poetry after reaching adulthood.Nevertheless,the Romantic lyric provided not only most of his form,but,altered to his own ends,much of the substance of the nonsense songs.

The debt to Romantic poetry begins with metre.The growth of Romanticism in literature was accompanied,of course, by attacks on the supremacy of the closed pentametric or tetrametric couplet,beginning with the many attempts at Miltonic blank verse,such as Thomson's in The Seasons,and with other experiments, such as Gray's resurrection of the Pindaric ode.With the Victorians,much of the experimentation of the previous

generation becomes common ground,and during the nineteenth century more poems are written in trochees and the ternary metres than at any other time in English literary history, while at the same time there are attempts to extend the possibilities of English prosody,by adapting the Greek syllabic metres,as Kingsley tried to do among others,by using a rather Biblical,declamatory free verse,as Martin Tupper and Walt Whitman did,antedated by the Ossian poems and Blake's Prophetic Books, or by a more intricate private system,as in the case of Gerard Manley Hopkins.The basis of all this is clear as early as Gray : there is a feeling that the closed couplet is too restrictive to express newly fashionable and more violent forms of literary emotion,hence the attraction to the wild,rhapsodical, irregular character of Pindar's odes,as they were seen at the time, and hence also the immense popularity of the Ossian poems.The attraction of more complex metres,and of intricate fixed forms,either traditional(ballade,rondeau) or of one's own invention,is of a similar kind,though here it is the entrancing, incantatory effect that is admired.All this goes hand in hand with the greater freedom of emotion and of expressive gestures, and is its natural corollary.

Lear did not invent anything new (although he was probably the only poet to use logodaeic metre with entire success,in the refrain of The Jumblies) and most of his metres can be found put to serious use in Tennyson (3).But his use of the forms - ternary metres,but also incantatory refrains (The Jumblies, Calico Pie),intricate rhyme patterns,complex stanzas rather like those of Keats' odes (The Jumblies, The Dong with a Luminous Nose, the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo) ,but his use of them is decidedly original.Like other good poets,he can control his verse-forms and metres to obtain the effect of speed and lightness, of even,flowing motion,of heaviness and grandeur,but the

subject-matter subtly alters the overall effect,and the same applies to Lear's preoccupation with sonority and atmosphere,again a general nineteenth-century possession,inherited from the Romantics.To take a few examples one could start with the famous opening to The Dong with the Luminous Nose :

> When awful darkness and silence reign
> Over the great Gromboolian plain,
> Through the long,long wintry nights; -
> When the angry breakers roar
> As they beat on the rocky shore; -
> When storm-clouds brood on the towering heights
> Of the hills of the Chankly Bore: -
>
> Then,through the vast and gloomy dark,
> There moves what seems a fiery spark...

This,with its incantatory atmosphere,its repetitions and near-redundancies (gloomy dark) reads like a parody of Tennyson,especially when the spark turns out to be the Dong's artificial nose.The fourth stanza of The Jumblies ,with its characteristic and striking use of a single colour adjective :

> And all night long they sailed away;
> And when the sun went down,
> They whistled and warbled a moony song
> To the echoing sound of a coppery gong,
> In the shadesof the mountains brown.

Or the haunting final stanza of The Daddy Long-legs and the Fly :

> And there they found a little boat
> Whose sails were pink and grey;
> And off they sailed across the waves,
> Far,and far away.
> They sailed across the silent main,
> And reached the great Gromboolian plain;
> And there they play for evermore
> At battlecock and shuttledore.

In all of these,and in the bulk of Lear's longer verse,the creation of atmosphere,by means of sound-effects,metrical patterns,diction,the suggestive

powers of words and names,is of great importance,as it is in Kubla Khan,or a poem of Shelley's or Tennyson's.The fact that what the duo do when they reach their Elysium is to play at two sports that are a sort of metathesis of shuttlecock and battledore by analogy with " shut the door " and " fighting cock ",does not in any way spoil the effect of a sad,but sweet and companionable eternity,any more than the nature of the heroes,two household insects,prevents the reader from feeling sympathy for their fated misfortunes (" The world has all gone wrong / Since one has legs too short by half, / The other much too long! ").

If parody consists in observing the style of a poem or school of writing,while mangling the substance,it can be seen that Lear comes close to parody of the Romantic lyric in much of his verse.In poems of Shelley,for example,we often feel that the effect of sublimity is an all-important consideration,so much so that the actual subject might just as well be the nursery-rhyme adventures that form the subjects of many of Lear's poems,just so long as the feeling could be maintained.From Romanticism,with its emphasis on the sublime experience that poetry provides,came the mood-poetry,the Empfindungslyrik of the nineteenth century,in which subject-matter is clearly only one component in the creation of a particular mood,and often not the important element.One could obviously give hundreds of example of this sort of thing; say Christina Rossetti's A Birthday (4),in which she informs us,among other things,that

> My heart is like a singing bird
> Whose nest is in a water'd shoot;
> My heart is like an apple tree
> Whose boughs are bent with thick-set fruit;
> My heart is like a rainbow shell
> That paddles in a halcyon sea...

To object that this accumulation of detail ultimately says no more than " I'm happy ",is,of course,to miss the point,since the aim of the poem is not to talk about a state of feeling in the usual way,much less to analyse it in the manner of Donne or Herbert,but to recreate it,and in this way to achieve both poetic beauty and self-expression.The same sorts of aims inform the nonsense songs,and certainly direct their technical procedures. The resemblance,outwardly,of Tennyson's poems to the nonsense songs has often been noted; " Tennysonian " is a stock adjective for them,and some have gone so far as to see Lear deriving his form directly from his more serious friend (5).Together they represent a latter stage in the development of the Romantic lyric,a stage at which there exists a stock of themes and ideas,and the preoccupation is with form and the achievement of atmosphere by technical means,and at which subject matter declines in importance,to disappear altogether in Swinburne,leaving only verbal music.

Even Lear could be considered as if he were Swinburne,many of his songs being seen as " orchestrated " rather than written; but the debt to Romantic poetry extends beyond the formal tendencies and uses of sound in his work.His also draws on the body of attitudes and situations and stock-figures that Romanticism built up,and of whose repetitions and elaborations Victorian poetry is full.There are quests and journeys to strange places,treated as symbolic (rather than allegorical) of spiritual quests,in The Owl and the Pussycat, The Daddy Long-legs and the Fly,and The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo .The Jumblies,in spite of common-sense warnings from the ordinary people,sail in a sieve in search of the marvellous; the Nutcrackers and the Sugar-tongs escape their dreary life,much to the consternation of their neighbours, " along the

blue hills and green meadows to ride "; the Dong with the luminous nose is on an eternal,doomed quest for a past love who represents the happiness of a lost childhood and of a lost spiritual realm.Then there are the figures of the heroes themselves,who are beautiful but strange,like the Jumblies,with their green heads and their blue hands,or who court ridicule and destruction by their originality and creative imagination,like the hero of The New Vestments,or who are doomed to unhappiness,like the daddy long-legs and the fly,whose inappropriate legs mean that they can never enjoy the warmth or community of associating with normal,so to speak, " humanity "

(' Why do you never come to court ?
I wish you'd tell me why.
All gold and shine,in dress so fine,
You'd quite delight the court ...'

' But oh! I can't,because my legs
Are so extremely short. ')

but who find consolation in a voyage to a lonely Elysium,the " Groomboolian plains ",or like the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo,who finds the same consolation in sailing turtle-back for " the sunset isles of Boshen " after rejection in love by a lady already committed to a man obviously far the Bo's spiritual inferior, " Handel Jones,Esquire ". Then there are the passages of natural description,stylized and atmospheric,like those in Tennyson or Arnold,often of the sea,which figures importantly in six of the nonsense songs,but also of wild landscapes,like that of the introduction to The Dong with a Luminous Nose ; and the general sympathy with the natural world that expresses itself in the numerous animal heroes of all kinds,the profusion of animal life in the limericks,in the Nonsense Botany, and most forcibly in Calico Pie and the Quangle Wangle's Hat,with their

evocations of an endlessly rich and fascinating world of created things, although this is not unmixed with a more traditional (for children's poetry) anthropomorphism :

> Calico Jam,
> The little fish swam,
> Over the syllabub sea,
> He took off his hat,
> To the Sole and the Sprat,
> And the Willeby-Wat, -
> But he never came back to me.

Finally there is even,in the two parts of Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos and in The Broom,the Shovel,the Poker and the Tongs,a sort of Byronic satire on conventional bourgeois manners.

All this means that Lear is,in a certain sense,a displaced Romantic poet,whose sense of the ridiculous will not allow his sense of the sublime to express itself directly,who avoids making himself look foolish by accident by doing so on purpose.In nonsense he created a world in which his deepest feelings about the world could be expressed without falling into the bathos or vacuousness of which Tennyson is far from innocent; because they deal with the sublime in terms of the ridiculous, the nonsense songs are more personal and more moving than the serious poetry of the Victorian period,because,while the romantic style of serious poetry was in the process of hardening into an empty set of conventions, of narrowing more and more till only the emotion generated within the poem was left,and no contact with,or suggestion of,anything wider,nonsense suggested limitless new combinations of ideas and circumstances,and hence new ways to sublimity,instead of elaborating more and more on well-tried formulae.Lear's poetry retains its power to haunt the mind because it is freshly invented,and conveys the surprised delight of invention,rather than the comfortable pleasure of elaboration; to say anything new in

the romantic-lyric vein,it was necessary to find a way of,so to speak, once again letting the sights and sounds of the world into the literary style,of creating a subject-matter capable of developing a life of its own,and revealing depths beyond the preconceived feelings and attitudes of the convention,and nonsense obviously fulfilled these criteria.Nevertheless,Romanticism remains the guiding force behind even the freest and most nonsensical inventions in a great many of Lear's best poems - the tenderness of feeling,and sense of atmosphere,that guides the fate of many of his nonsense creatures,the Dong,the Bo,the Jumblies,the Owl and the pussycat,among others.Even among the limericks,with their frequent dependance on more old-fashioned arbitrariness of occurrence (not appealing to any sensibility,but simply happening) and on nursery-rhyme violence, which represent,if you like,the more primitive,earthy,un-Victorian side of Lear,we can sometimes find a pure mood-piece,like the following mysterious gem :

> There was a young lady in white
> Who looked out at the depths of the night;
> But the birds of the air,filled her heart with despair,
> And oppressed that young lady in white.

So Lear's poetry can be seen as an amalgam of the Romantic world of sublimity and sensibility,of sympathy with nature and a tendency to doomed,elected heroes,and the prior nursery-rhyme world,heartless but innocent,tending to free,amoral inventions based on the whole stock of experience,to anthropomorphism and the arbitrarily marvellous,and to a lack of concern with the central figure and his fate.In another way,Lear can be seen as simply continuing the tradition of Romantic lyric,with the Nonsense Songs,in the only way possible to his time and temperament,with the necessary personal element of originality producing a characteristic exaggeration of the " classic romantic " style.This is why the comparison

to Poe is so interesting and suggestive.

Poe represents a very extreme form of Romantic lyricism,so that he can be seen as a transitional figure to decadence and symbolism. In the earlier stages of any poetic movements,there are certain inner preoccupations which lead to characteristic forms of expression; in the later stages these forms of expression are perceived and enjoyed for themselves regardless of their content,and this leads to elaboration of the outward.Certainly this is true of Poe.If a poem of Shelley's has a strong atmosphere,one of Poe's positively suffocates; if Shelley was concerned with the incantatory use of sonority,Poe wrote poems,like The Bells,that contain very little else; if Shelley was fond of exotic invented settings that do not tie the lyrical impulse down with circumstantial detail,Poe invented a virtual geography of such places,all of them so exotic it hurts; and if Shelley is concerned above all with the expression of feeling by means of incident,setting,and sound,Poe is an orgy of emotional expression at the expense of prose sense,or causation, or anything else,so that his verse,bristling with frissons,reads like the diary of an affective schizophrenic,so little connection is there between emotion and object.In short,Poe goes so far that he sacrifices meaning for the atmosphere he is so intent on creating,as he sets it out in his famous essay on poetic composition (6),and anyone so preoccupied is in great danger of writing nonsense,even without intending to,while Lear,with a somewhat similar poetic ideal and ancestry,did so deliberately.

The feeling behind all of this,perhaps,is that poetry is not simply the art of creating pleasing objects out of words,but the only way of expressing transcendental feelings that do not,in essence,belong to this world of mundane fact,and hence that poetry,to fulfill its true

function,must create and inhabit its own visionary world - an echo of the ideas of Plotinus and the Gnostics,that there is something in man that cannot be satisfied with this sublunar world,some divine spark that hankers for higher things,and,in Romanticism,having no mystical system to hand,that is doomed to frustration both in this yearning and in the ordinary life for which it makes the poet unfit.While Lear was certainly too sensible a man to take such ideas very seriously for very long,he certainly felt their appeal,and loved poetry,like Shelley's Alastor,in which they are embodied.The practical consequences of this for verse were the love of vagueness,sonority and atmosphere,because these things can suggest a life higher than can be expressed in plain prose statement,a tendency to stripped,symbolic action,of generalized rather than detailed quests and loves,and a tendency to lose touch with a thread of prose sense,to be carried away on currents of emotional association,past the point of intelligible paraphrase,something we already find in a poem like To a Skylark.It is only one step from this to the feeling that content is largely unimportant,so long as feeling is conveyed,and this is the point of departure for a great deal of Poe's verse,for a great deal of the bad verse of the period,and for the nonsense songs,which rely for their effect on their way of combining impressive sonorities and doom-laden atmosphere with self-mockery,absurd situations,and comical invented characters.

Whereas Poe created a mythical world as a basis for his poetry from the exotic settings of Keats and Shelley,from the Gothic novel, and his impressions of classical antiquity,Lear's was assembled from elements of nursery and the creatures he invented to amuse children.While Poe in his theoretical writing claims that stirring the emotions is a craft which can be pursued like any other craft,and leads him to pile

on evocative phrases,Lear begins in the emotional neutrality of nursery rhyme and seems to arrive at emotional expression by accident,through his intense involvement with the world he has created simply for the pleasure of doing so.In other words,Poe was trying for emotional expression and largely succeeded in writing nonsense,while Lear's case was the reverse.

The place Lear and Poe represent in the development of the Romantic lyric can be seen in the work of a contemporary,included in Wyndham Lewis' anthology The Stuffed Owl (7) ,a certain Thomas Holley Chivers,a Poe imitator whose poetry seems to me to sum up better than the original,which might be expected of an imitator,all that is most nonsensical in Poe,and in nineteenth century Romanticism in general.I will quote a brief extract (8) :

> From her Paradise Isles in the ocean
> To the beautiful city of On,
> By the mellifluent rivers of Goschen,
> My beautiful Lily is gone !
> In her Chariot of Fire translated,
> Like Elijah she passed through the air,
> To the city of God,golden-gated -
> The home of my Lily Adair...

Here we see just how close serious Romanticism could unintentionally come to plagiarising Lear.For the City of On,which is supposed to move us merely by having an exotic name and the epithet " beautiful ",Lear has " the great Gromboolian plains ",or " the land where the Bong-trees grow "; for the " rivers of Goschen " he has the western " isles of Boshen ".But the fact that the isles of Boshen rhyme with ocean does not obscure the fact that their root word is " bosh ",and hence that Lear couldn't really take seriously the vague paradise to which he consigns the Monghy-Bonghy-Bo,to join the Daddy Long-legs,the Fly,Lily Adair, and any number of Poe's heroines " in what ethereal dances / by what eternal streams " (9).The same applies to paraphenalia,all the objects

accumulated by a poem to intensify its atmosphere,and which in a serious poem present the greatest danger of nonsense,easily overloading a poem and dragging it down to bathos.Chivers gives us Rosalie Lee,who is like

> Many mellow Cydonian suckets,
> Sweet apples,anthosmial (sic),divine,
> From the ruby rimmed beryline buckets,
> Star-gemmed,lily-shaped,hyaline :
> Like the sweet golden goblet found growing
> On the wild emerald cucumber-tree.... (10)

while Lear gives us " an Owl and a useful Cart / And a pound of Rice and a Cranberry Tart", etc (The Jumblies),deliberately trading on the arbitrary appearance of any accumulation of incidental details to create nonsense; Chivers created nonsense unwittingly when the aim, to stir the feelings,became drowned in the bulk of the methods adopted to achieve this.

Very bad verse like Chivers'unintentionally parodies the style it uses,showing its limits by stepping beyond them; it follows that Lear's verse,representing a personal extension of Romantic lyric, is also,in some sense,a parody of it. A parody,after all,adopts the outward style of a sort of poetry,while filling it with an absurd content, and this is exactly what Lear seems to do in The Dong with a Luminous Nose,with its haunting atmosphere,and seeming predominance of sound over content,evidenced by the fact that the story concerns a semi-human character,who,to aid himself in search through dark regions for his lost love,creates an enormous lamp that ties on to his face like a luminous nose.And yet it is Lear,rather than Poe,who seems to be the true successor of the early Romantics,of Kubla Khan and Blake's Songs, because nonsense,rather than providing him with a way of making fun of Romanticism,enables him to acknowledge both the emotional sublimity of

its ideals and their incongruity with day-to-day life and its realities. Poe (and his followers) tacitly acknowledge the latter fact by creating a poetry entirely removed from this reality,approaching the condition of music,and concentrating on the elaboration of the largely traditional mechanisms of sublimity,vagueness,exoticism,doom,melancholy,hopeless love and yearning for death,and so on.Lear,by creating his own,far more original world,also keeps clear of reality as such,but his " concrete and fastidious " mind (11) does not allow him to drift away,but joins the sublime to the ridiculous in a way eloquent of the pathos of everyday life.Because the Jumblies set sail in a sieve as matter-of-factly as nursery rhyme characters,and not on some anthosmial,hyaline,chthonic and pleonastic ocean,they are able to discover things on their voyage that come as a surprise to the reader; the Owl and the Pussycat are convincing in their idyllic happiness because they also " dined on mince and slices of quince ".Lear is never very far from the world of nursery rhyme,which,as with all traditional verse,implies realism and refusal to leave anything out of the picture; he is usually even closer to a joke or pun,which constantly break up threatening pompousness in his letters,and certainly never allow it to appear in his work.Where the mind of a Poe had to narrow itself to a set of pale conventions when it came to self-expression in verse,else he could not have maintained the intense almost hallucinatory purity of feeling which is what he required of poetry.The kind of nonsense to which this led is a nonsense of vacuousness, of gestures far greater than the content behind them,as in the Chivers pieces quoted.But Lear's nonsense,in spite of its superficial resemblance as another semi-parodic exaggeration of the Romantic lyric,is a positive thing,a matter of super-abundance - of meaning,of things,of perception and imaginative invention,and there is no topic with which

it is afraid to deal,neither eating and drinking nor hopeless spiritual love.Though at first the similarity between the two styles and worlds is apparent,in fact they arrive at their nonsense from opposite directions, Poe by exclusion of everything that is normally regarded as necessary for " sense ",but that would interfere with the effect he aims at,and Lear by reckless inclusion in one work of elements normally regarded as disparate,by intensity of imaginative invention that disrupts the usual flow of associated ideas and levels of experience.Both illustrate the limits of traditional Romanticism,but where Poe represents the narrowing to mere literary convention requiring a converted audience,Lear widened them to include a great deal of new experience and a great many new ways of treating conventional experiences ,though this achievement was so closely bound up with his own unique personality and gifts as to be applicable only to himself.

References :

(1) C.M.Bowra, The Romantic Imagination (Oxford University Press; London,1950,reprinted 1961), pp. 278-280; also pp. 174-196 om Poe.

(2) Examples given in : Thomas Byrom, Nonsense and Wonder The Poems and Cartoons of Edward Lear (Brandywine Press; New York,1977), pp. 152-156; for instance the following,from a piece called Stanzas for Music :

So when grief has made lonely and blighted our lot,
And her icy cold chain o'er her spirits has cast,
Will not memory oft turn to some thrice-hallowed spot
That shines out like a star among years that are past ?
Some dream that will wake in a desolate heart,
Every chord into music that long has been hushed,
Mournful echo ! - soon still - for it tolls with a smart,
That the joys which first woke it,are long ago crushed.

(3) For example the metres and stanza forms of The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo in Row us out from Desenzano ; Incidents in the Life of my Aged Uncle Arly in The Lady of Shalott ; Calico Pie in Sweet and Low. No doubt many other examples could be found by the avid searcher through Tennyson's poetical works.

(4) A Birthday; printed in Poems of Christina G. Rossetti (Macmillan &co; London,1890),p. 101.

(5) For example,Lear's poems are " subliminal parodies of serious Victorian poetry,chiefly Tennyson's ", in : Peter Porter and Anthony Thwaite, The English Poets From Chaucer to Edward Thomas (Secker and Warburg; London,1974),p.278.

(6) " The true artist will always contrive first,to tone them (elements of truth) into proper subservience to the predominant aim,and, secondly,to enveil them,as far as possible,in that Beauty which is the atmosphere and essence of the poem. " from The Philosophy of Composition in The Complete Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe ,edited by R.Brimley Johnson (Oxford University Press; London,1909),p. 248.

(7) The Stuffed Owl An Anthology of Bad Verse ,selected and arranged by D.B.Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee (J.M.Dent and Sons; London,1930, 3rd edition 1948).

(8) The Stuffed Owl p.184; from Eonchs of Ruby.

(9) To One in Paradise, in The Complete Poetical Works of Edgar Allan Poe, p. 41.

(10) The Stuffed Owl p.184; from Rosalie Lee.

(11) From the verses beginning " How pleasant to know Mr. Lear... ", The Complete Nonsense ,p. vii.

Part Two : Lear and Word-games.

Among other things,the nineteenth century was the home territory of the pun,the spoonerism and comic dialect,of charades,parodies,and all sorts of verbal parlour-games.This form of socializing was very familiar to Lear,and it was certainly his adeptness at the mildest and most harmless sorts of verbal fun,as an entirely characteristic manifestation of his personality,that endeared him to so many people,both adults and children. In the eighteenth century,one can imagine the rise of a man of lower-middle class origins to social popularity due to a gift for stealthy satire and witty return; only in the nineteenth century could such a rise follow from the gift of amusing children with absurd nursery-rhyme style improvizations.In most ways,Lear is far more a typical Victorian than a precursor of surrealism or of theatre of the absurd; all his nonsense,if violent and disturbing in places,is governed by a Victorian notion of harmless fun,which had,to a large extent,replaced the religiously stricter ideas of improving and character-building as the desirable qualities of children's literature.And this " harmless fun " is something that even the most serious-minded can indulge in,as shown by Ruskin's highly favourable account of the Book of Nonsense in Pall Mall (†); this,of course follows Wordsworth's lead in placing great value on innocent childhood experience.Children are no longer unfortunate heirs to original sin,who must be redeemed with struggle and strictness; instead they have a value of their own,they understand things that adults have forgotten,they have a fresh and true vision,and all this extends to their pastimes and innocent amusements,which should be encouraged rather than denied them.

The inevitable result is a desire to emulate the child,and a century in which there is a greater preoccupation with adult play - adults behaving like children - than at any other time.While it would be scandalous for a Victorian paterfamilias to have a homosexual affair,or have a habit of transvestitism discovered,there is nothing shameful,or even embarrassing,in the fact that he builds model ships,loves a good game of charades,or prefers the company of children to that of adults; this shows,both in what is approved and in what is disapproved,the preoccupation with natural moral innocence,as opposed to disciplined moral virtue.This atmosphere of adult play can be found in the playfulness, whimsy,and often sentimentality of Lear's letters to his friends; his biographers are fond of quoting a particularly characteristic document (2) which is as follows :

Thrippy pilliwinx, - inkly tinsy pobblebookle abblesquabs ? Flosky? Beebul trimble flosky ! Okul scatchabibblebongibo,viddle squible tog-a-tog,ferrymoyassity amsky flamsky ramsky damsky crocklefether squiggs.

Flinkywisty Pomm,
Slushypipp.

This must surely be the apotheosis of the whole tendency,in which any attempt at intelligent adult communication dissolves into an apoplexy of baby-talk - language has become pure play,whose material is its sounds; nostalgia for childhood expresses itself in imitation of the babbling of a baby for whom sounds are muscular movements that lead to interesting auditory results,not symbolic elements of self-expression.

In the realm of language and literature,the fascination with games has various consequences; these I summarise under the heading " Word-games ". This term means literally what it says : the abandonment of the usual reasons for word use,or their relegation to a subsidiary place,and replacement by a playful impulse,grouping,altering and misplacing them just for the pleasure of doing so.It is as if the mind,

in its preoccupation with words,stopped short of its normal goal of the word as a pointer in a total intelligible communication,and instead considered words by themselves,divorced of a context and a meaning,for their possibilities as objects of play,in their sounds,shapes and suggestions,and then used this perception to recombine them in entirely new ways.Obviously the depth of the process can vary,and with it the immediate intelligibility of the result.The letter just quoted goes about as far as it is possible to go while remaining bound to the word at all; the nonsenses are much less disrupted,the longer verses less still than the limericks.The degree of intelligibility of the newly created verbal world will depend on how far the words are used in accordance with the rules that surround them in ordinary usage,and,in the case of invented words,on how closely these fit into similar patterns.In all the published nonsense,the rules of the familiar use of words are fairly closely obeyed, the element of disruption is small but crucial,and is often channelled into the formalized patterns of the pun or other form of word-play,the most basic and widely-accepted way of confusing the form and content of words,as in those primary-school jokes in which one survives on the dates in the calendar and the springs in the armchair; the plot of " The Two Old Bachelors,for example,depends on the double meaning of the word " sage ", a coincidence with enough power to prompt the two heroes in an attempt to cut up a wise old man for use in stuffing,while in The Four Little Children Who sailed Around the World,we find a discussion of the blue-bottle-fly,why it should live in bottles,and why these should be blue.

The pun - i.e. using one sense of a word where the other would fit,or confusing two senses - and related forms that involve taking

metaphorical or accidental sehses of a word literally and extracting consequences from them,is the least confusing of disruptive devices, familiar and always recognizable for what it is.More characteristic of Lear,and more original with him,is a trick of misusing or almost misusing a word,especially a difficult word that would,to his young audience,be more apparent as a shape than as a meaning,in a way that combines parody,whimsy, pleasure in the look and sound of words,and sheer enjoyment of obfuscation. The bulk of examples are in the prose tales and the limericks; an especially rich source is the last line of the limerick.As is well known,Lear's limerick begins with the stereotyped formula, " There was an Old Person of Blank ", and ends with the repetitive " That .... Old Person of Blank " (or Young Person,Old Man,Young or Old Lady,and so on,with the appropriate number of syllables in the place-name). This means that,far from containing a brilliant unexpected twist,or outrageous new rhyme,the last line of a Lear Limerick can seem entirely redundant,and is so from the point of view of narrative,since the only new element in it is the adjective that fits into the space provided (there are exceptions).But precisely this logical redundancy presents a great challenge to the verbal imagination to create interest with a single epithet,and provides,because nothing of any substance is being communicated,an ideal opportunity for the kind of verbal play I am discussing.

There is a hierarchy of forms.In the simplest,Lear will use an exaggeratedly Latinate word that is not in fact out of place,but appears comical because of its union of pomposity and perfect redundancy,the fun

derives partly from the sheer absurdity,and partly from the implied parody of pomposity :

There was an old person of Grange,
Whose manners were scroobious and strange;
He sailed to St. Blubb,in a waterproof tub,
That aquatic old person of Grange.

There was an Old Lady of Prague,
Whose language was horribly vague.
When they said, ' Are these caps ? ' she answered ' Perhaps ! '
That oracular Lady of Prague.

In the second sort there is some uncertainty; there may be some reason, deducible from the rest of the verse,for the application of the particular epithet,but we feel that pure verbal play has come to predominate :

There was an old man at a casement,
Who held up his hands in amazement;
When they said, ' Sir ! you'll fall ! ' he replied,' Not at all ! '
That incipient old man at a casement.

(i.e. his fall is incipient ?);

There was an old person of Barnes,
Whose garments were covered with darns;
But they said, ' Without doubt,you will soon wear them out,
You luminous person of Barnes ! '

(i.e. the patched appearance of his clothes makes everyone stare at him,so that he is metaphorically " luminous " ?).

Then there is the sort whose epithet has no logical connection, that I can discern anyway,with the rest of the verse,and seems to be there purely for the fun of the word itself.For example :

There was an old man of Port Grigor,
Whose actions were noted for vigour;
He stood on his head,till his waistcoat turned red,
That eclectic old man of Port Grigor.

There was an old person of Rye,
Who went up to town on a fly;
But they said, ' If you cough,you are safe to fall off !
You abstemious old person of Rye ! '

These are recognizable words,but so out of context as to make them as

little meaningful as purely invented words, " scroobious ", " runcible ", " that ombliferous person of Crete ". In both cases there is a conflict in the mind of the reader,between the perception that the point of these words is precisely that they lack meaning,and the desire that they should mean something,which leads to a racking of the brains to see what they could be intended to mean,even to searches of the work for occurrences of the same word,to establish some sense by comparison of contexts : after all,words are supposed to mean something.This tension is the very essence of Lear's verbal play; it involves a deep doubt about words,expressing itself in a preoccupation with their outward aspects,and the childish and irrelevant question, Why should they be called pigs ? Thus a word like " eclectic " ceases to be a mere arbitrary sign,and instead becomes a sort of animal or creature of its own,inhabiting its own outward shape, but behaving with a capricious self-will in attaching itself to contexts with which its inside,its meaning,has nothing to do,behaving,in other words, like the language Humpty-Dumpty discusses in a famous passage from Through the Looking-Glass (3) ; thus the Blue-Bottle Fly,because of the coincidence of its name,must live in bottles,which must be blue,to protect themselves from the cold,and so on.This sort of fun obviously derives from the attitudes to words,especially hard words,of young children,to whom words are still more apparent as particular shapes and sounds,with their own characteristics,than as signs in a communication system,and to whom the words runcible,plumdumphious,pomskizillious,and whatnot,are no more or less strange than those found in the average dictionary.

This tendency of words to become independent and to " do whatever they wish " will clearly generate not only purely verbal fun, but also to a certain type of very arbitrary fantasy,of the kind whose content seems traceable to the author's fascination with particular words, rather than with any emotional impulse behind them,or any particular

fitness in the nature of things.It is as if the child in the author,not very familiar with the fixed habits of words,recombined them in ways that appeal on a level of outward shape or associations,and them the adult,with his knowlege of the realities for which the words stand,turned this verbal semblance into reality,or at least was unable to refrain from making some comment.In the Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World,a passage that begins as purely verbal play seems to become a parody of Romantic moral ideas :

> The Blue-Bottle Flies began to buzz at once in a sumptuous and sonorous manner,the melodious amd mucilaginous sounds echoing all over the waters,and resounding across the tumultuous tops of the transitory Titmice upon the intervening and verdant moutains,with a serene and sickly suavity known only to the truly virtuous.

Again and again we come across passages that seem to be prompted by the desire to use a certain word in a given context,with results that are often charming.A group of crabs scuttle away

> warbling songs with a silvery voice and in a minor key;

or the children return to their boat

> with a strong sense of undeveloy asthma;

or again the children come across

> A large number of crabs and crawfish - perhaps six or seven hundred - sitting by the waterside,and endeavouring to disentangle a vast heap of pale pink worsted,which they moistened at intervals with a fluid composed of Lavender -water and White-wine Negus,

all of which is purely incidental,and seems to derive more from the appeal of the words " crawfish "," worsted "," Negus ",rather than from any reason why these creatures should be so engaged.But of course this may derive simply from the appeal of the notion; this kind of very pure fantasy is hard to distinguish from recombination of words,both being distinguished by a great element of surprise and pleasantly improbable discovery.

In the nonsense songs,Lear presents his nonsense in a much more " cooked " state than in the tales,but it is still possible to find a large element of sheer verbal play in the makeup of the former. The Bong tree,Periwinkle wine,forty bottles of Ring-Bo-Ree,the monkey with lollipop paws,the syllabub sea,and so on,are all example of the kind of verbal extemporization that one finds in the letters; the same applies to the creatures who live in the Quangle-Wangle's Hat in the poem of the same name,the Fimble fowl,the Olympian bear,the Orient calf,the Attery Squash and the Bisky Bat,and so on.Attempts have been made to explain some of these (the Bisky Bat is connected with biscuits,the Attery Squash with the cockney's 'at,the Nupiter Piffkin,from Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos ,with Jupiter and pipkins,and so on (4)),but though these are often ingenious, they miss the point of play with words,and retain only one pole of the tension,the desire to explain, without the other,the relish for sheer nonsense.A good indication of the function of word-play in the nonsense songs can be found in one of the poorer examples,a poem called The Cummer-bund ,a kind of Jabberwocky,in which the fantastic words are,however, the Hindustani words for perfectly ordinary things,some of which have since entered the general language (cummerbund,nullah).This joke,by which the cummerbund is a terrible monster,the bheestie (carrier) a small bird,and so on,is not a particularly good one,but the poem does illustrate the workings of nonsense uses of language,though in a crude way, since it is quite possible to follow the action without any idea of what the words mean.

Just as the prose tales are full of familiar elements in unfamiliar circumstances (crabs untangling worsted) so the songs contain many cases

of unfamiliar elements in familiar circumstances,so that we can understand what is happening without knowing what is what.Thus although it is a mistake to try to interpret the names of the creatures who live with the Quangle-Wangle,this doesn't mean that they are sheer nonsense on all levels; rather their nonsensical names seem to be an attempt to recreate the wonder and supprise caused by the diversity and strangeness of real creatures,and this effect is clearly communicated by the nonsensical names,so that the poem seems to talk about an edenic harmony among the incredible diversity of the world's creature,and to express wonder at observing this.All of this could of course be related to Lear's work as a bird illustrator,his wide travel and observation,but it is enough to recognize the tendency.Much of the verbal invention of the nonsense songs can be understood in this sense,a sort of recreating in the nonsense world of the strangeness perceived by the child in the real world,and this, perhaps,is the aim of most word-games,to regain the surprise that words and things can no longer excite by themselves.

It remains for me to say a word about another sort of word-game, one which is less purely a matter of words,the game of parody.This can be fairly said to have come to its culmination as an art in the nineteenth century,because,some might say,there was then an abundance as never before of fit subjects of parody.Parody operates,like the kind of nonsense I have just beendiscussing,by retaining the atmosphere or method of some poem of style,but substituting ridiculous content,and the more closely the tone of the original is caught,the more effective the parody will be. My own favourite specimen is the parody of a constantly parodied passage

from Thomas Moore :

> I never reared a young gazelle
> To glad me with its soft black eye,
> But when it came to know me well,
> And love me, it was sure to die;

and so on. The tone of romantic self-pity is perfectly and economically ridiculed by the anonymous

> I never had a piece of toast
> Particularly long and wide,
> But fell upon the sanded floor -
> And always on the buttered side. (5)

It would be unlikely that Lear could remain entirely unaffected by such a popular form of humorous verse, and he does not. I have already discussed the exaggeration, bordering on parody, of romantic elements in his songs; there are a few other elements worth mentioning, particularly the way in which the tone of a particular style is adopted for his own content. Often the target seems to be conventional, moralizing children's literature, in which the evil are condemned and punished and the good commended and rewarded; some of the limericks come to mind to illustrate Lear's mock praise and blame :

> There was a Young Lady of Norway,
> Who casually sat in a doorway;
> When the door squeezed her flat, she exclaimed ' What of that ? '
> This courageous Young Lady of Norway.

> There was an Old Person of Gretna,
> Who rushed down the crater at Etna;
> When they said ' Is it hot ? ' He replied, ' No it's not ! '
> That mendacious Old Person of Gretna.

In the prose tales, there seems to be a certain amount of parody of conventional travel-books and similar literature -

> When they had landed, they walked about, but found to their surprise that the island was quite full of veal-cutlets and chocolate-drops and nothing else.

and in the constant trotting out of two impressive adjectives to apply to everything in The Story of the Four Little children,often in surprising combinations - " the most copious and rural harmony ", " such perfect and abject happiness " and so on.But none of this is very original,though it often is highly amusing.It is safe to say that parody is not at the heart of Lear's nonsense,and even when the techniques of parody are used,it is to create a nonsense effect rather than to attack anything,to amuse children rather than to appeal to their elders.Parody implies taking a moral stand of a sort,and Lear's nonsense is very amoral.The pleasure of sheer invention is more important than scoring on particular targets,and as often as not the things that are parodied (or seem to be parodied) are those with which Lear is in complete sympathy.Infact,rather than parodying them,Lear is simply making use of their potential for nonsense; if travel books are amazing,Lear's versions are even more so.The emphasis is on the product rather than on the target,and the process - of minor importance in Lear's work, - is more a tribute than an attack.

References :

(1) Quoted in : Angus Davidson, Edward Lear Landscape Painter and Nonsense Poet (Kennikat Press; Port Washington N.Y.,1968; re-issued from an original edition of 1938),p. 265.

(2) Letter to Evelyn Baring,quoted in : Vivien Noakes, Edward Lear The Life of a Wanderer (Collins; London,1968) p.189.

(3) Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass And What Alice Found There (Macmillan &Co.; London 1871,reprinted 1910), chapter VI, Humpty Dumpty, pp. 114-136.

(4) For example Byrom, Nonsense and Wonder, p. 218 : " that entranced Cockney, the Attery Squash,whose prescence ensures that in the blissful dance (i.e. around the Quangle Wangle's hat) there will be much squashed-hattery ".

(5) Quoted in: Verse and Worse, selected and edited by Arnold Silcock (Faber & Faber; London 1967), p. 104.

Part Two : Lear, Nursery Rhyme and Folk-Poetry.

The Romantic movement in literature was, of course, accompanied by a renewal of interest in folk-poetry. The belief that expression is more important than style, the achievement of a true poetic frisson more praiseworthy than any amount of skill or taste, opened the way to appreciation of naive sorts of poetry that the eighteenth century, as evidenced by Doctor Johnson's famous parody of the ballad, was bound to regard as cretinous and devoid of interest for a serious person. The nineteenth century consolidated this trend, and its poetry is full of attempts, starting with those of Coleridge and Walter Scott, to capture the unforced magic of the most haunting anonymous poetry - attempts that were, if I may express a personal opinion, entirely without success, since if a good poem resulted (as with The Ancient Mariner and La Belle Dame sans Merci) it inevitably contained so much that was uncommon and peculiar to its author, that it lost the essential qualities of the folk-poem, which never tries to show off, to prove anything or to express anything in the Romantic sense of the term. Nevertheless, such attempts and the admiration that lay behind them left a residue in much of the period's poetry, especially in the " lyrical narrative " poetry that Tennyson and Lear both produced, that is, poetry cast in narrative form, but whose interest lies rather in atmosphere, psychology and the intricacies of its verse rather than in the story as such.

There is no particular evidence that Lear himself felt any special affinity for folk poetry,and its influence on his verse,modifying that of the more literary sorts of Romantic poetry,was an indirect one.Many features,such as the repetitive ballad metres of many of the nonsense songs,might have been absorbed either from naive,or from literary ballads,and probably came from the latter; others,such as the exclusive use of narrative forms,even for poems like Calico Pie or The Pelican Chorus whose content and texture are entirely lyrical,are probably due to the conventional use of this form both for children and by non-literary people.There are some features that can probably be traced to the ballads or similar poetry,for example the use of simple parallelisms,as in the following :

> the King and Queen,
> One in red and one in green. (The Daddy Long-legs and the Fly)
>
> And we'd go to the Dee,and the Jelly Bo Lee,
> Over the land and over the sea (The Duck and the Kangaroo)

or the fondness for repeated lines,or whole refrains,and especially the knack of a telling simplicity of statement,not at all characteristic of Lear's contemporaries,in which no word is ornamental,and the statement is entirely plain,but also enchantingly pretty and " right " :

> And hand in hand,on the edge of the sand,
> They danced by the light of the moon. (The Owl and the Pussycat)
>
> Far and few,far and few,
> Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
> Their heads are green,and their hands are blue,
> And they went to sea in a sieve. (The Jumblies)

There are plenty of similar examples,especially in the earlier songs. However side by side with these are features not only uncharacteristic of the ballad,but entirely contradictory in spirit.The plain diction of the pieces just quoted is characteristic of the ballad,in which one word is used for one idea and elaboration is achieved by varied repe-

tition or lengthy parentheses; it is not characteristic of the Lear of the nonsense songs,who relies for a good deal of his effect on a shaded and expressive diction that mixes very literary,even pompous language,with exaggerated ,parodic forms of such language,with baby-talk and very colloquial speech,so that the starkly simple is only one element among many (I shall have more to say about this mixed diction in the section analysing individual poems).The same applies to the use of detail, which is usually ornamental and picturesque,sometimes florid,as in the list of things that the Jumblies brought with them :

> And they brought an Owl,and a useful Cart,
> And a pound of rice and a cranberry tart,
> And a hive of silvery Bees.
> And they brought a Pig,and some green Jack-daws,
> And a lovely Monkey with lollipop paws,
> And forty bottles of Ring-Bo-Ree,
> And no end of Stilton cheese.

Lear,in other words,used elements of the ballad when these coincided with the Romantic lyric styles within which the nonsense songs are largely conceived.His poems are,of course,nothing at all like the standard Romantic lyric of Shelley,Byron,Keats,or of Tennyson,William Morris, Christina Rossetti,but the influence of folk poetry is not a major reason,as it is in the case of Blake,say,John Clare or Thomas Hardy,for this difference - a difference in spirit and intention as well as in substance.

If this is so,it might seem that there is little reason to mention the influence of folk-poetry at all. So far,I have been using term " folk poetry " to include only the ballad and folk-song,but a third type of anonymous,traditional poetry exists,the nursery rhyme,whose influence on Lear is absolutely fundamental,and closely analogous to

the influence of adult folk-poetry on many serious poets of Romantic persuasions similar to Lear's.This aspect of Lear's work has always been the most apparent to his critics,if only because it is the one source of his poetry that differentiates him from his contemporaries,rather than placing him as a " typical Victorian "; Emile Cammaerts went so far as to say that Lear's nonsense arose entirely out of the world of nursery rhyme (1),and although this is going too far (Cammaerts probably had the limericks in mind above all),it is quite true that the nursery rhyme lies behind all of Lear's work,much as the folk song lies behind John Clare's or the Broadside ballad behind the poems of Blake,occa sionally erupting,as in these other two cases,in passages or whole poems of virtual pastiche of nursery rhyme.Although,unlike Lewis Carrol,Lear never openly used the names of nursery rhyme characters,perhaps because he never felt the need to entice children to a sense of familiarity with his created world,the penetration of both the forms and the substance of nursery rhyme into the fabric of his nonsense,is far greater,so great,in fact that it is difficult to give a general treatment of the subject,without simply examining each of the poems in turn.Above all,a great deal of the nonsense gives the same impression as a nursery rhyme, seems to inhabit the same sort of world; I shall list some of the features that lead to the formation of this impression.

An important thing to be remembered about the nursery rhyme is that it predates children's literature as such.Few real nursery rhymes were intended for children in their original forms; conversely,few poems written for children have gained the universal currency of the old anonymous rhymes (there are exceptions,especially the Misses Taylor's utterly banal and utterly unforgettable Twinkle,Twinkle,Little Star).

Nursery rhymes are of two types; the first grows out,either of children's games,often forgotten,and having traditional gestures and actions associated with them,and,in their words,appropriate physically-derived rhythms,or else out of instructional material,mnemonic verses intended to aid in learning to count or learning the alphabet,but often retained purely for entertainment; the second type consists of purely literary verses, that is,verses not intended for anything but diversion,and complete in themselves,and which are almost always worn-down versions of adult poetry of one sort or another and from one age or another.Both types,it should be noted,originate in processes quite different from those usually associated with literary invention,and this is never their primary aim; the result is that they offer a uniquely odd and outrageous type of fantasy,which has its own appeal,unlike any other sort of literary pleasure,and consis ting largely of surprise,amusement amd bemusement. For example,this :

My father was a Frenchman,
A Frenchman,a Frenchman,
My father was a Frenchman
And he bought me a fiddle.
He cut it here,
He cut it here,
He cut it down the middle, *

which is a rhyme of the first sort,and this :

I had a little dog,and his name was Blue Bell,
I gave him some work,and he did it very well;
I sent him up stairs to pick up a pin,
He stepped in the coal-scuttle up to his chin;
I sent him to the garden to pick some sage,
He tumbled down and fell in a rage;
I sent him to the cellar to draw a pot of beer,
He came up a gain and said there was none there,

* Footnote : all examples used are taken from Iona and Peter Opie's uniquely fascinating book, The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes (2).

which is of the second,both illustrate the wildly arbitrary,quite pointless and strangely pleasing narrative offered by the nursery rhyme,and only by the nursery rhyme.In fact,during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,they must have formed the only access for many people to literature of pure imagination,certainly of imagination quite so pure; for Lear they were a liberating influence,both a stimulant and a model for " disinterested fantasy ",so to speak,inclining him to pure nonsense, that is,in the opposite direction to the influence of the Romantic lyric. Thebtwo are,as it were,the warp and weft of the nonsense songs,though in the limericks,hursery rhyme entirely predominates.

The first type of nursery rhyme is bound to remain largely unassimilable.Like work-songs,sea-shanties,and similar forms of oral poetry associated with physical action,the game type of rhyme is usually too primitive,and,on paper,too near to meaninglessness,to be compatible with more literary sorts of poetry; the counting and alphabet rhymes generally have so little substance outside of their set purpose that the same applies.However they have left some marks on Lear's work, mainly of the sort that suggest he deliberately used elements of their style as accepted and conventional ways of writing for children.For example the occasional but constant use of nursery talk in his poems, which may be their most nauseating aspect,but is also part of their peculiar individuality.For some reason difficult to imagine,nursery rhymes of this sort are invariably stuffed full of teensy-weensies, bye-byes,eeny-meeny-miney-mos,and so on,though why playing with children should lead to a desire to imitate the babbling of very young babies is hard to say; my own feeling is that this is an irreducible primary impulse,comparable to the territorial or procreative imperatives ; on

seeing babies or small furry animals one experiences a basic animal urge to break into reduplicative compounds,add -y to everything and speak in falsetto.Be that as it may,Lear seems to have felt obliged to mimic this style of adress.The owl and the pussycat meet a " piggy-wig ",the Jumblies wrap their feet in a " pinky paper ",the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo is " such a Hoddy Doddy ",while his name itself appears to originate (God can say why) from Lear's onomatapoeic word for the sound and motion of spiky horse-chestnuts when they are kicked (3) ;on the side of vocalizations of actions we get such obvious nursery rhyme echoes as " flippity flup,they drank it all up " from Calico Pie,or " He's a Mopsikon-Flopsikon Bear " from a limerick.The rhythms of the poems also bear this imprint,with their tendency to strong rocking,or jigging ternary rhythms.All this however,applies largely to superficial points of style,and the bulk of the influence comes from the more purely literary type of rhyme.

The sorts of corruption that take place in a poem are very interesting indicators of the nature of nursery rhyme,and hence of those aspects of Lear's poetry that derive from it; while it would be too much to say that such traditional rhymes represent a child's view of adult verse,or even of the adult world,since adults obviously play the major part in the transmission of such rhymes,it is their way to reduce things to kinds of thinking,fantasy and association of ideas that seem typically child-like.The first and most obvious type of corruption that occurs is the simple elimination of elements that do not find a place in childhood experience. Lavender's Blue,for example,apparently derives from a ballad whose original words begin (4)

> Lavender's green,diddle diddle,
> Lavenders blue
> You must love me,diddle diddle,
> cause I love you.

I heard one say,diddle diddle,
since I came hither,
That you and I,diddle diddle,
must lie together.

More often such elements,especially the very frequent political or otherwise topical references,are retained in a form that makes it clear that they are appreciated for qualities other than those which their original readers found in them; this may be something in the sound,especially in the rhymes,in which case they have been transformed into jingles,or in the sense,in which case they have been transformed into the characteristic kind of fantasy of which I have spoken.In many cases it is the combination of the appealing and memorable sound with the odd arbitrariness of a topical reference removed from its context.This,for example :

As I was going by Charing Cross,
I saw a black man upon a black horse;
They told me it was King Charles the First -
Oh dear,my heart was ready to burst.

which the Opies explain (5) as a Puritan satire on Royalist emotionalism, the black man being the tarnished brass statue of Charles the First,which was moved to Charing Cross in 1675.But to the uninformed listener,the poem becomes simply a mysterious jingle,like many of those used as skipping rhymes (MY mother SAID / I never SHOULD / PLAY with the GIPsies IN the WOOD),and the black man on his black horse,who is inexplicably one and the same with a king of England,contains an infinity of odd and dreamlike suggestion,as does the equally inexplicable reaction of the narrator. Without it being any part of the intention of the author,a poem has been created very like the quirkiest sort of dream,with its bizarre objet trouvé,identity of separate things,and abnormal emotion.And this applies to numerous rhymes.

There is also a type involving the appeal of pure fantasy.A part-

icularly fascinating example is the rhyme (6)

> If all the world were paper
> And all the sea were ink,
> If all the trees were bread and cheese,
> What should we have to drink ?

which was apparently originally intended as a parody of the extravagant language used by Jewish writers to convey the nature of God,as in this saying quoted by the Opies from the Talmud :

> If all seas were ink and all rushes pens,and the whole Heaven parchment and all sons of men writers,they would not be enough to describe the depth of the mind of the Lord.

Ironically,the ridicule has vanished with its object,and the rhyme now impresses for the conceit itself,though without the reason for it,no longer a mere metaphor for vastness,but an invitation to imagine what such a world would actually be like; in other words,a piece of pure fantasy. Most of the rhymes seem to have survived for one or both of these reasons, because they sound well,and because,even if their full meaning is not understood,they still describe a situation that appeals to the imagination.

> There was a King and he had three daughters,
> And they all lived in a basin of water;
> The basin bended,
> My story's ended. (7)

> There was a little maid,and she was afraid
> That her sweetheart would come unto her;
> So she went to bed,and covered her head,
> And fastened the door with a skewer. (8)

A consequence of this is the extreme abruptness of the rhymes,illustrated by the examples above,in which things simply happen as they will with no sense of obeying any laws other than those of imagination,and related to this is their amorality,and tendency to violence,either in the literal sense of actual murder and mayhem,or in the sense of exaggerated arbitrariness of incident,as when the dog gets in the coal-scuttle,falls in a rage,a man jumps in and out of a thorn bush,scratching his eyes out

and in again,Dr. Foster steps waist-deep in a puddle,and in general the action proceeds by vertiginous leaps,rather than smooth patterns of unfolding or of cause and effect.This is due partly to the element of knockabout fun,but also to another tendency of the wearing-down process,the shortening of the action to its elliptical essentials,to the extent that it may not be fully understandable in itself,and superfluous material,such as any sort of judgement on or explanation of,the events presented,is definitely jettisoned. This can be seen in the frequency with which a single stanza only of a long poem will be preserved for nursery purposes,or,if there are more,these will be far less well-known.

These aspects of the wearing-down of poems can be seen to contribute to a characteristic overall effect.The substance of a poem is reduced from meaningful comment to memorable and peculiar jingle,and complex ideas reduced to a sort of rudimentary but appealing fantasy (" If all the trees were one tree,what a great tree that would be ", " When I am King,you shall be Queen "); the narrative is reduced to the bare minimum and often a great deal further,while all suggestions of morality,judgement or satire are omitted in favour of events that simply happen,for no special reason.The result is usually to produce a very nonsensical sort of rhyme,quirky,arbitrary,brief and entirely without rational justification; occasionally,however,the corruption and ellipses create, quite by accident,a sort of pure poetry,as the Victorians would have understood the term,simple and mysterious lyricism of epigrammatic spareness and great powers of evocation and suggestion,the most haunting sort of nursery rhyme ;

Boys and girls come out to play,
The moon doth shine as bright as day.

I had a little nut-tree,
Nothing would it bear
But a silver nutmeg
And a golden pear;

The King of Spain's daughter
Came to visit me,
And all for the sake
Of my little nut-tree.

How many miles to Babylon ?
Three score miles and ten.
Can I get there by candlelight ?
Yes,and back again.

These rhymes,which arrived at their shapes by the constant friction of repetition perhaps combine complete triviality,even vacuousness,with irresistible charm,better than any other poems in English,and since this was,put crudely,a major aim of the Victorian lyric poet,it is inevitable that this sort of rhyme had a particular effect on Lear.

Now to consider the actual influence of the nursery rhyme, and its characteristic ways of thinking,on Lear's verse itself.The branch of that veres that most clearly shows this influence is the limericks.It was the verses of Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen,of uncertain authorship,published in 1822,that first gave Lear the idea of writing brief illustrated verses to amuse his children friends,since an infinite variety of nonsensical incident could be fitted into the form.These verses,which are actually limericks in form, were,in the later nineteenth century,often regarded as genuine nursery rhymes,and two of them have found their way into the Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes,including the particular one that sparked Lear off :

There was an old man of Tobago,
Who lived on rice,gruel and sago;
Till,much to his bliss,
The physician said this -
' To a roast leg of mutton you may go '.(9)

From this Lear has taken,apart from the form,the comic rhymes (which are actually hard to avoid in such a cramped metrical form),the governing of these by an exotic place-name,and the general nursery-rhyme atmosphere of odd happenings for no especial reason.It is interesting however that Lear's limerick is much more like the classic nursery rhyme in most

respects; even his tamest limericks contain happenings much more bizarre and funnier than this,and their development is far less predictable. Further,there is the all-important last line; Lear brought the limerick much closer to nursery rhyme spirit by simply having the last line repeat the place name of the first,or occasionally the second rhyme.In this way the temptation,quite foreign to the nursery rhyme,to be witty and ingenious with the final rhyme,is eliminated,and with it the possibility of a conventional narrative with a proper denouement winding up the story.The result is that the limerick becomes a form of nonsense very like that of the oddest and most pointless nursery rhymes,like the story of the Knave of Hearts who stole the tarts,of the pussy thrown in the well,the little tailor who accidently shot his sow,the frog who went wooing,or my personal favourite,this one;

> When good King Arthur ruled this land,he was a goodly king;
> He stole three pecks of barley-meal to make a bag-pudding.
> A bag-pudding the King did make,and stuffed it well with plums,
> And in it put great lumps of fat as big as my two thumbs.
> The King and Queen did eat thereof,the noblemen beside,
> And what they could not eat that night,the Queen next morning fried.

In all these rhymes nothing really happens,there is no drama,no expectation and precious little story of any kind; like Dr. Foster,the rhymes go to Gloucester,step in a puddle and turn back,and that is all, " if the bowl had been stronger,my tale had been longer ".All this applies to the limericks,too,which can be as charmingly empty of incident as the barest nursery rhymes :

> There was an old man of the West,
> Who wore a pale plum-coloured vest;
> When they said, ' Does it fit ? 'he replied, ' Not a bit ',
> That uneasy old man of the West.

The limericks make up for this lack of drama,partly with their illustrations, but partly,as is the case with the nursery rhymes,by means of " nonsense ".

Their nonsense is their attraction,and not only does it act as a substitute for conventional kinds of interest,but it quite clearly could not exist if these were retained; and here we come very close to the question,what exactly did Lear mean by nonsense,what distinguishes this nonsense he felt his work possessed from any other kind of nonsense, or from anything else in general ?

Firstly,it does not mean just the exercise of uncontrolled imagination,though this plays an important part; the ability to create a wide variety of circumstances is very important,and above all,of unexpected,unheard-of circumstances,which nevertheless seem quite right likethe Young Lady who let all the birds of the air nest on her bonnet,the other who played the harp with her exceptionally sharp-pointed chin,or the third whose curly hair grew all over the sea.Neither does it consist in anything incomprehensible or illogical.Rather,its essence is that way of stopping just short of really saying anything that is expressed in the repetitious last line; the old person whose falls into a volcano and claims that it isn't hot is " that mendacious old person of Gretna " and so on.The nonsense does not consist of the perfectly " nonsensical " in the conventional sense,like the letter already quoted that begins " Thrippy pilliwinx "; what distinguishes it is the pretence,stoutly maintained,of making good sense,an approach to meaningful statement that never quite makes it in the fullest sense.The best sign is the question " so what ? " : after hearing the nursery rhyme " Hey diddle diddle... ",the listener expecting a real story is bound to say " So what ? "; after hearing a Lear limerick the listener expecting the more common,witty and amusing sort,often will say " So what ? ".The

question means that the minds normal appetites - for a story,for wit,for expression of thoughts or feelings,for satire,parody,of anything involving value-judgements - have been carefully frustrated,and hence the verse is nonsense,it doesn't mean anything.This is illustrated at its limit in the limerick :

> There was an Old Man of Cape Horn,
> Who wished he had never been born;
> He sat in a chair,till he died of despair,
> That dolorous Old Man of Cape Horn.

This is an especially frustrating poem because it skirts conventional sense so very nearly that we can,so to speak,feel various meanings brush our cheeks as we pass.Isn't it an autobiographical statement,or an expression of existential angst,or a satire on exaggerated melancholy, or an attempt by Lear to come to terms with his moods of deep depression by parodying them ? Of course it isn't,it is simply a poem about an Old Man of Cape Horn,and this is precisely its appeal; just as a koan loses its point if it is printed in a book with answers at the back,so a limerick of Lear's is not intended to be understood in the usual sense.Rather it takes effect,and precisely by saying nothing,communicating nothing,it amuses us,intrigues us,and sticks in the mind.And his limericks bear repeated reading in a way that witty limericks certainly do not,just because they have no " point ".A limerick,like a nursery rhyme of the sort I have been discussing,is essentially a shape made of odd events, just a particular shape,with no particular associations,but with an appeal that belongs only to itself; in other words,the limerick,and pure nonsense in general is an art-form in itself,with its own internal principles,no doubt a very trivial art-form,but a very original one,which grows almost entirely out of the arbitrariness of nursery rhyme,adding only Lear's personality in the form of the bizarre and whimsical characters and incidents that form the material.

To sum up,the nursery rhyme,in the course of time,tends to lose its original meaning,and to become simply a kind of inconsequential (in every sense) fantasy that appealingly irritates by appearing to say something in the normal way,and in fact doing nothing of the kind; Lear picked up this trick to create his own " nonsense ",which,like the nursery rhyme,often appears to be decipherable in full if only we had the lost original from which it was descended,though in fact such an original would be irrelevant,as it is for the essential life of the nursery rhyme, because the change that has taken place is in the thought process required to cope with it,so that the emphasis is on how it makes one think,not on what it asks one to think about.Here too we have the tension I have mentioned earlier,between the desire to make full sense of the words,and the realisation that enjoyment of them depends on not being able to do so,and that any solution would be irrelevant.This tension is the essence of the nonsenses,their outward sign and essential element at once; the pleasure derived from the "nonsenses" is like that of scratching an itch, a pleasure inconceivable without the scratching,but equally inconceivable without the itch.However only the limericks,of all Lear's "nonsenses" in verse,present this kind of nonsense in its pure state,even the alphabet verses being more concerned with picturesque images and purely verbal fun.The limericks are the five-finger-excercises of Lear's nonsense, while the more highly developped verses inevitably,because of their need to sustain a greater length without either boredom or a random episodic structure like a mere string of limericks,add other elements to the sheer,essential nonsense.The best of the songs resemble the special sort of nursery rhyme I have mentioned,in which the corruption of an adult poem leads,by accident,to a kind of skeletal romantic lyric,which

combine s sheer nonsense with evocation and emotional expressiveness. This sort of rhyme must have especially impressed Lear,and the structure of his songs has been profoundly affected by it.

The process by which such rhymes arise is,as in the case of more characteristic nursery verse,one of reduction,coinciding with the Romantic belief that suggestion and omission are more moving that straightforward statement; by omitting circumstantial details and merely hinting at the situation,the Romantic poet wishes to create an infinity of emotional suggestion,a sense of mystery and vagueness in which only the feeling is clear,not the details of the action; by ommitting the elements that are of no interest to children,by retaining the readily understandable feeling often without retaining any explanation for them,tradition has accidentally produced a similar poetry.Or at least,it is inevitable that a man of romantic sensibility in poetry,like Lear,should read the nursery rhymes in this way,even if they had never previously assumed this appearance.Again we have the tension between the desire to fully understand,and the need not to,but here it assumes a rather different form,much like the tension often apparent in writings on,say Kubla Khan,or other " mysterious " poems,like Sir Walter Ralegh's Ocean to Cynthia.The poem is recognized as a mystery,or as containing a mystery, and attempts,never quite successful are made to clear up this mystery, but somewhere too there is the realisation that much of the power of the poems and their uniqueness depends on the fact that this mystery is simply not susceptible of solution,because of the fact that it does not frame itself as a problem,but as a vagueness requiring deep thought of an indecisive kind that does not lead to a conclusion c from premises a and b,but causes one to enter directly into a certain way of thinking and a certain atmosphere that are the poem's real substance. Hence the nonsense songs seem much less arbitrary than the limericks, they make emotional sense and tell a comprehensibly connected story;

while the limericks are examples of Lear's fantasy (to update Coleridge's term fancy),the nonsense songs show us his imagination,or as Blake would say,they are products of the Daughters of Inspiration rather than the Daughters of Memory.And this enlargement of the world of nonsense can be attributed partly to the pull of the Romantic lyric,but also to the effect of this special sort of nursery rhyme,though still mixed,of course,with many elements of more random purer nonsense like that in the more typical rhymes.

A good example of this blending can be seen in the rather little-known poem, The New Vestments. The plot concerns a man who " invented a purely original dress ",consisiting of,to quote the entire second stanza,

> By way of a hat,he'd a loaf of Brown Bread,
> In the middle of which he inserted his head; -
> His Shirt was made up of no end of dead Mice,
> The warmth of whose skins was quite fluffy and nice; -
> His Drawers were of Rabbit-skins; - so were his Shoes; -
> His Stockings were skins, - but it is not known whose; -
> His Waistcoat and Trowsers were made of Pork Chops; -
> His Buttons were Jujubes and Chocolate Drops; -
> His Coat was all Pancakes with Jam for a border,
> And a girdle of Biscuits to keep it in order;
> And he wore over all,as a screen for bad weather,
> A cloak of green Cabbafe-leaves all stitched together.

On venturing to show himself in public,however,he is set upon by a mob of animals and boys,who strip him of everything he is wearing,eat it, and leave to run home naked home and resolve

> ' I will not wear a similar dress any more,
> ' Any more,any more,any more,never more ! '

Obviously this is still fairly close to the nonsense of the limericks, or simpler nursery rhymes,in fact it seems to be based on a common rhyme,collected by the Opies,about the man in the moon,named Aiken Drum,whose hat was cream cheese,coat roast beef,buttons penny loaves, and so on,who meets a man named Willy Wood,which latter eats up all his clothes successively,finally choking on the haggis bags that were

his breeches (10).One can imagine a limerick based on this theme that would simply state that such a thing occurred,and would be much like the nursery rhyme.But this poem goes a good deal further,and departs from the rhyme in a significant way.First,the adversary of Aiken Drum is omitted,so that attention is focussed entirely on him and his calamity becomes an act of fate,an effect increased by the notion that the man invented his odd clothes,where for Aiken Drum they are clearly just his natural state,the hypothesis one accepts in order to read the rhyme.Then, the elements of oddness,apart from the central one,are omitted - why should the man live in the moon,and play on a ladle,what sort of a name is Aiken Drum,and why is Willy Wood his enemy,or is he just hungry ? Even the choice of clothes is explained,as deriving from a desire to be original,and for the inexplicable the poem substitutes feeling : however much or little the poem may be construed as an expression of personal problems of Lear's (and I shall go into this in a later section),it must be interpreted as depicting the shame of someone ridiculed for being original,for exposing the products of his private imagination to general view,a notion in no way present or implied in the nursery rhyme.By shifting the emphasis from fantastic invention to emotional expression (think of the vehemence of the man's resolve),Lear has not really succeeded in producing an appeal to compensate for the loss of the charm of the sheerly nonsensical,and this poem,though it shows an interesting stage in the evolution of nonsense,is one of his less interesting pieces.

One of his best,however,is The Jumblies,also based on a well-known nursery rhyme,but illustrating a much greater elaboration,and a much better blend of nonsense and expression.The rhyme is the one

about the wise men of Gotham who went to sea in a bowl," if the bowl had been stronger,my tale had been longer ",and of course the " wise men " are really fools.Lear picks up this dichotomy,and calls his sailors " Jumblies " to emphasize the way they seem jumbled,upside down,to the ordinary people who figure here,as in so many poems and stories,in an uncomprehending and disapproving role.They go one further than the Gothamites,and go to sea in a sieve,defying commonsense and experience,and have a thoroughly pleasant adventure,thus turning the nursery rhyme on its head.By reducing the central oddity (going to sea in a sieve) to a mere premise for a long poem,Lear emphasizes the lyrical element of the verse,using the opportunity to give Romantic impressions of nonsense territory,as well as passages of the stripped-down lyricism of the more poetic sort of nursery rhyme.As in that type of rhyme,mystery and vagueness are emphasized; the action is as comprehensible but inconsequent as that of " I had a little nut-tree " or " I saw three ships a-sailing ",the atmosphere as magical and the economical words often as haunting.The result is to give the impression of a sort of archetypal voyage undertaken beyond the bounds of everyday experience,and the nonsense language and appurtenances only aid in this sense of the creation of an independent world,full of mystery and meaning,based only loosely on essential features of the real world; the poem is a Moby Dick of Ancient Mariner of nonsense, though it arrives at its much smaller kind of generality of feeling by a different way.The lyrical nursery rhyme arrived at its state by accident,because of the tendency to omit the circumstantial and often the usually essential connecting links of narrative; Lear tries to reproduce the impression that this produced on a man educated in poetry by Shelley,Byron and Walter Scott,and the result is the same simple

charm,the same sense of dreamlike,archetypal action,all overtones and no fundamental,but embellished both by occasional Tennysonian passages, as in the opening of stanza four,already quoted (" They whistled and warbled a moony song / To the echoing sound of a coppery gong / In the shade of the mountains brown ") and by sheer nonsense,and the paraphenalia of fantastic invention that is partly the property of the nursery rhyme proper,partly due to Lear's own gift of whimsy.

In the Biographia Literaria,Coleridge quotes two lines of dramatic poetry to distinguish between fancy and imagination,the first from Otway's Venice Preserved,

Lutes,laurels,ships of amber,seas of milk,

the other from King Lear,

And have his daughters brought him to this pass ? (11)

These two lines embody the distinction very aptly; in the first we have fantastic invention,which aims to move b y means of the wonderful,by a kind of invention that is very far-fetched,but still strikes us as a mere riffling through of the memory for things to associate; this is very close to the spirit of the nonsense of the limericks,with odd and whimsical items substituted for the impressive ones,as in the enumeration already quoted of the things the Jumblies brought with them (" an Owl, and a useful Cart / And a Pound of Rice,and a Cranberry Tart,/ And a hive of silvery bees. ") The second arises quite naturally from its context, and represents a summation of a whole range of expeience,but also a really new creation; the difference could be compared to that between a mixture and a compound,or between invention and discovery; in the first familiar things are put together in predictable ways to create something pleasingly new,while in the second,the fusion is complete,and the creation is a world of its own,with its own responses and necessities.

This is very like the distinction between the two types of nursery rhyme I have discussed,or between the limericks and the nonsense songs,or rather the essential characteristics of the nonsense songs.That an owl and a pussycat should go to sea,or jumblies,or a daddy long-legs and a fly,is not fantastic invention of the same order as that a man should stand on his head till his waistcoat turns red,or possess a Barbary ape who sets his house on fire,but the former represent wholly new worlds,in which expressiveness and lyricism compensate for what has been lost in arbitrary nonsense.The premises are often similar,as is the nonsense furniture and population,but the use that is made of these things is now personal,lyrical,romantic,imaginative,rather than abrupt,grotesque, baffling,fantastic; the nonsense songs at first seem less original,but in fact they are more so.Where the limericks and alphabetic rhymes stay close to the unmitigated whimsy and oddity of the most usual nursery, the nonsense songs extract the essence of the least usual,and create an entirely new form of expression,different in spirit from anything else in the language,and certainly an entirely new departure in children's verse.

References :

(1) Emile Cammaerts, The Poetry of Nonsense (Routledge and Sons; London)

(2) The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, edited by Iona and Peter Opie (Oxford University Press; London 1951,reprinted with corrections, 1952).

(3) A former child-acquaintance of Lear's recalled the latter's kicking Horse-chestnut burrs,and calling them " yonghy-bonghy-bo's ",which presumably imitates their bumping,bouncing movement; it is hard to say why this word should be given to the hero of the poem as a name,except perhaps for his round,bouncy appearance as Lear draws him. See Noakes, Edward Lear, pp. 243-244.

(4) The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, p. 265.

(5) The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, p. 114.

(6) The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, p. 548.

(7) The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, p. 253.

(8) The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, p. 280.

(9) The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, p. 407.

(10) The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, p. 52.

(11) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria (J.M.Dent & Sons; London 1817,reprinted 1939),from the section on the distinction between fantasy and imagination,Chapter IV, p. 46.

Part Two : Lear and Children's Verse.

The history of English children's verse really begins in the eighteenth century.That does not mean,of course that there was no verse written for children before that,or even that it was all,as one tends to imagine,uncomprehending sermon advising the child to look to the bee, the ant,and so on,or else playful classicism,like the verses of Marvell or Herrick adressed to children,in which literary conceits prevail over realism,as in the treatment of agricultural topics.But it is true that recognizable sorts of children's verse begin in the eighteenth century,and this is largely a matter of the attitudes of the writer; while the earlier writer may have tried to fit his thoughts and language to those of a child,this was always conceived of as coming down to the child's level,writing in a way fitted to a child's rudimentary understanding,whereas later writers were trying rather to come across to the child's camp,to recapture a child-like way of thinking,with greater or less credibility. These beginnings correspond to the movement referred to as sentimentalism,in religion and the arts,and which may,according to taste,be seen as an omen or first stage of Romanticism,as an expression of the sensibilities of the rising bourgeois,or as a consequence of the ethical doctrines of writers like the Earl of Shaftesbury,with their emphasis on inbuilt impulse and man's natural goodness,which were to flower a little later in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.Be all that as it may,it is true that the earliest children's verse that seems familiar in spirit to modern readers,was produced by the movement known,in

its German manifestation,as Pietism,a return to the essentials of Protestantism with its emphasis on personal feeling and inspiration, which also took seriously the words of Jesus,that the little children are the ones who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.It is not very hard to see in this the germ of Romantic attitudes to childhood,and the first solid reason for the writing of children's verse,since earlier Christianity had usually preferred to concentrate on St. Paul's dictum to the effect that,on reaching a man's estate,one puts away the things of childhood.Now it was seen as imperative to reach and fortify the inner moral innocence of the child before it was corrupted by the world; while such ideas were not new - they are expressed in Vaughan's The Retreat,with its talk of " angel infancy " - their popularity was something new,and the feeling of the existence of a community of the like-minded who would give appropriate literature to their children,meant that the innocence of early childhood was a target for practical action rather than a topic for private meditation,as with Vaughan or Traherne. (1)

The early fruits of this religious attitude are the poems of John Bunyan,which are charming,earnest,clumsy and memorable,and the well-known children's hymns of Charles Wesley and especially Isaac Watts,(2) which are sententious,sermonizing,meretricious in versification,but sometimes appealing and containing odd flashes of genuine imagination,and these especially became the staple literary diet of children for at least a century,and the foundation of children's verse,echoing in Blake's songs,the poems of the Misses Taylor,of Charles and Mary Lamb (" Come little Robert,near; / What filthy hands are here ! " (3)),and even in Robert Louis Stevenson's Child's Garden of Verses (4),perhaps the best of all collections of poems for children.This,then,might be described as the orthodox line of English children's poetry,whose aim is mainly

to bring up little minds in the right way,but which attempt,anyway, to do so by speaking in the child's own language without condescencion, and by touching its imagination,as in Watts The Sluggard :

> I passed by his garden,and saw the wild brier,
> The thorn and the thistle grow broader and higher...
> He told me his dreams,talked of eating and drinking,
> But he scarce reads his Bible and never loves thinking.

an attempt which was almost always marred by the inability to abandon standard literary language,or to give the imagination free rein.There are occasional exceptions,as in the poems for children of Christpher Smart (5),which reflect as well as Traherne's an understanding of the areas where the saintly intersects with the child-like,and which are thus less afraid to indulge innocent imagination for its own sake,and so to make the practice correspond to the ideal,of entering into childlike innocence in order to communicate with it; these poems are,in any case, among the best things he ever wrote,though,as with most attempts at simplicity,they do not quote especially well :

> I give my praise to Christ alone,
> My pinks already show;
> And my streaked roses fully blown,
> The sweetness of the Lord make known,
> And to His glory grow.
>
> Ye little prattlers that repair
> For cowslips in the mead,
> Of those exulting colts beware,
> But blithe security is there,
> Where skipping lambkins feed. (6)

Better known,however,and the most important and celebrated children's verse between Watts and Lear were the poems of Jane and Anne Taylor (7), many of which are moralizing tales,though written in the simplest language yet attempted for chidren's verse,but among which are some purely imaginative poems,looking forward to those of Stevenson,including the famous Twinkle,Twinkle,Little Star,all of which, not just its ubiquitous

opening stanza,ought to be known,and a number of other poems of equal charm,like the one in which the child,like Stevenson's,thanks the cow for doing such a sterling job of milk-production,and then goes on to advise :

> Do not chew the hemlock rank,
> Growing on the weedy bank;
> But the yellow cowslips eat,
> That will make it very sweet.
>
> Where the purple violet grows,
> Where the bubbling water flows,
> Where the grass is fresh and fine,
> Pretty cow,go there and dine. (8)

The importance of these poems,which were praised by the " progressive thinkers " among the Victorians (9),is that,although they clearly derive from the sort of verse written by Isaac Watts,and share its ideals,they show a genuine attempt to share the experiences of childhood,if in a rather sentimental way to modern ears,and hence represent the first real children's lyrics,as distinct from hymns or narratives or allegories. The belief in the value of childhood had spread beyond the religious context,was soon to become the property of the general population,and reach its zenith in the Georgian movement,whose two best poets,W.H. Davies and Walter De la Mare,held to it so firmly that their adult poetry is often impossible to distinguish from their children's verse,and both are chiefly remembered for the latter.The poems of the Taylors were very popular and influential and it is quite impossible that Lear would be unaware of them,though the traces they left on his own poems seem to be of the negative sort; to their simple Herrick-like diction and versification he preferred a complex diction not at all transparent to the meaning and a Tennysonian use of sonority and complex meters; and the grotesquery,amorality,whimsy and above all the nonsense of his verse are quite foreign to the sisters' poems.

Lear's first book, the Book of Nonsense,was something quite new in children's literature,and is the only child's book of verse of its century whose substance,as opposed to its language,has not dated at all. This is because it is the first time a really first-rate literary imagination devoted itself to sheer fantasy,to simply devising situations and characters that would appeal to children,to real children,the children of the inhabitants or guests of the Earl of Derby's home estate of Knowsley.The unprecedented aspect of Lear's verse was that it shared not only in the moral innocence,freshness of vision,and other sentimentally acceptable sides of childhood,but also in the amorality, quirky perception and love of purely verbal fun that go with these.Lear didn't only write verses about skipping lambkins,in fact he didn't write any in his first book; instead he wrote

> There was an Old Person of Buda,
> Whose conduct grew ruder and ruder;
> Till at last,with a hammer,they silenced his clamour,
> By smashing that person of Buda;
>
> There was an Old Person of Tartary,
> Who divided his jugular artery;
> But he screeched to his wife,and she said, ' Oh,my life !
> Your death will be felt by all Tartary ! '

and illustrated these verses with a similar gleeful violence.All his work is so free of any suggestion of condescension - unlike any other writer of poetic talent since Smart - because he wasn't trying to speak a child's language,but simply following his natural bent,and while in the eighteenth century he would have been an eccentric,or even a mad man,like Smart,in the nineteenth his particular talent was quite respectable.

One may be excused for feeling,however,that children's poetry is at best a sentimental and self-contradictory notion,because poets are not children and children like poetry even less than they appreciate it; even the limericks probably need the personal presence of a Lear

if they are to be really enjoyed by people under fifteen.Hence perhaps more important than Lear's place in the history of children's poetry is,so to speak,the place of the history of children's poetry in Lear. Lear's letters show that nonsensical invention was very much a natural form of self-expression; his strong sense of the absurd prevents him from speaking seriously about lofty topics,so he developed a unique way of speaking absurdly about them,and his gift for word-play was also something of a (at times tiresome) preoccupation; his qualities of naturalness,friendliness and humour,combined with shyness and self-consciousness,meant that he tended to get on as well,if not better,with children than with adults,without there being,as in the case of Lewis Carroll,anything of the sexually pathological about this.Given these circumstances,added to a romantic way of feeling and desire to write poetry that expressed these feelings, children's verse seems the natural outcome.But it can be seen from this that Lear approached this from a rather different angle from all other writers of children's verse; his aim was not to improve children,or even just to divert,but to create an equivalent of the lyricism of the Romantics in the medium of children's poetry,to adapt Tennyson for the nursery.And where earlier writers had produced purely diverting verses,they used naturally simple topics in a style assumed for the purpose; but for Lear the style was quite natural,and the material was what required adaption. Whether the nonsense songs are really successful as poetry for children is another question; my own feeling is that the simplicity of The Owl and the Pussycat makes it understandable to children,but they would make little if anything of The Dong with a Luminous Nose,which is strictly for adults.The importance of children's poetry for Lear was that it gave him free rein : he could conceive of the absurdest situations he wished,and take advantage of the opportunity to be unserious

before an audience that would enjoy that sort of thing,as a man may cavort about and talk nonsense with his children in a way that he would never think of doing in adult company.It also,and more importantly, gave him,as I have suggested in an earlier section,a fresh approach to the traditional Romantic themes in a way that reaffirmed these ideas while also admitting to their tendency to bathos; the key poem here is The Dong with a Luminous Nose ,whose hero is a unique member of that tribe of Romantic questers after an unattainable ideal in his blend of serious and comic,of self-pity and self-mockery.The nonsense songs are perhaps the best of all children's poetry because they are,in a way,displaced adult's poetry,that is,they contain their author's natural self-expression, not an attempt to speak a language unnatural to him;but for just this reason,because Lear was not,after all,a permanent child,they mean less to children than does much worse literature,and in the course of English children's poetry,running from Watts through the Taylors to Stevenson, Belloc,De la Mare,and so on,Lear's songs,like Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market,stand rather apart in being essentially personal and making no attempt to restrict itself to a child's understanding.Nonetheless,it is against the background of this poetry that the nonsense songs must be seen,if only to note the contrast; to compare them to the poems in A Child's Garden of Verses,is to find not only a far greater range and intensity of imagination,and quirkiness of diction and ideas, but also an emotional sophistication,a complexity of feeling,quite out of the range of the average child's poem,or,for that matter,the average child.

References :

(1) For Henry Vaughan,see The Complete Poetry of Henry Vaughan, edited by French Fogle (New York University Press; New York 1964) The Retreate, p.169.

Happy those early dayes ! when I
Shin'd in my Angell-infancy.
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race,
Or taught my soul to fancy ought
But a white,Celestiall thought ".

For Thomas Traherne,see Poems,Centuries and Three Thanksgivings, edited by Anne Ridler (Oxford University Press; London 1966).For example The Return, p. 79 :

To Infancy,O Lord,again I com,
That I my Manhood may improv :
My early Tutor is the Womb;
I still my Cradle lov.

(2) See Bernard Lord Manning, The Hymns of Wesley and Watts Five Informal Papers (The Epworth Press; London 1942,reprinted 1954),the only writer who seems to have taken the hymns seriously as poetry.The example quoted is available in The Oxford Book of Children's Verse, chosen and edited by Iona and Peter Opie (Oxford University Press; London 1973),p. 51.

(3) Oxford Book of Children's Verse, p. 144.

(4) Robert Louis Stevenson, A Child's Garden of Verses (The Bodley Head; London 1896).

(5) Christopher Smart, Hymns for the Amusement of Children, in The Collected Poems of Christopher Smart , edited by Norman Callan, (Routledge and Keegan Paul; London,1949) volume II, pp. 963-1001.

(6) Hymn XXV, Mirth; in Collected Poems of Christopher Smart,p. 988.

(7) TOxford Book of Children's Verse, pp. 114-124.

(8) Oxford Book of Children's Verse, p. 123.

(9) For example Elizabeth Rigley,writing in the Quarterly Review of 1844.She gives a list of recommended children's books,placing the books of the Taylors third,only after traditional nursery rhymes and fairy stories,very sensibly prefacing recommendations with the remark that children will enjoy and learn from books not in the least suitable or intended for their understanding.Quoted in : Children and Literature Views and Reviews, edited by Virginia Havilland (The Bodley Head; London, 1973).

Part Two : Conclusion.

Lear stands in the tradition of nineteenth century children's verse,in that he shared the general enthusiasm for children and desire to write for them in an unmannered and understanding way,but he also stands apart from it,partly because he largely succeeded in doing this,but also because his own main influences were elsewhere,especially in nursery rhyme and the Romantic lyric,and his own talent for absurd verbal improvization,which,poured into the mould provided by the Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen,was the origin of at least his simpler sort of nonsense.The nonsense songs,his most considerable achievement,are a kind of poetry unique in children's verse,either literary or traditional,and unique in the whole of poetry for that matter; starting from the basis of the elliptical narrative and skeletal lyrical atmosphere of certain nursery rhymes,he adds his own elaborations, thus reversing the process of reduction and simplification that created such rhymes in the first place,but these elaborations do not consist of explanatory information that would destroy the atmosphere,but of curious details,descriptive passages,and in general the adumbration of a whole,self-sufficient nonsense world,containing characters and places that recur in several poems,now as minor,now as major components. This world,and its conventions,gave him an ideal field for the exercise of his imagination,much as the mythical country invented by the Brontë children provided the background for the poems of Emily Brontë (1).And as in her case,the poems must be seen as expressions of feeling,whether or not these feelings can derive from the life itself,a question I

shall consider in the next part of this thesis.

Lear's nonsense is multilevelled; it consists of certain characters and typical paraphernalia ,even of certain words,like 'runcible' and 'scroobious',that have yet to be given any meaning,but also of certain ways of thinking and ways of expressing feeling.In the limericks it is the more superficial elements that predominate,the fantastic invention in the realm of things and incidents,and it is here that the debt to nursery rhyme,and the reliance on purely verbal invention,regardless of expression,is seen most clearly.In the nonsense songs,these things are subordinated to an emotional content akin to that in more serious poetry, and here the Romantic lyric shows its influence,both in providing themes and stock characters to be transformed into nonsense so that they can move in the nonsense world, and providing elements of the nonsense itself,in the use of sonority and atmosphere to create its effects,in the fondness shown in many poems for extended passages of description, bare of incident,which are quite alien to the spirit of nursery rhyme, and in general the tendency to focus on feelings,as demonstrated in the transformation of the absurd incidents of Aiken Drum into The New Vestments,with its unavoidable suggestion of the expression of feelings of a man injured by making his inner self too public,a notion even more alien to nursery rhyme,or any traditional verse,or any (almost any) other children's verse.This mixture and blending of quite disparate influences means that various means of interpretation suggest themselves, and it is this that I shall consider in the next part.

References :

(1) The Brontës ,living constricted lives,imagined exotic regions,but Lear,who had travelled as much as anyone could ask,imagined nonsense beings and happenings with the same intensity of feeling.See : Gondal's Queen A Novel in Verse by Emily Jane Bronte, edited and arranged by Fannie E. Ratchford (University of Texas Press; Austin,1955).

PART THREE : CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LEAR'S NONSENSE.

Part Three : Aesthetic Criticism.

The attitude to Lear of his contemporaries can be gauged from Ruskin's comments in Pall Mall, placing Lear at the top of a list of one hundred favourite books (1). " Surely the most beneficent and innocent of all books yet produced ", he suggests, " is the Book of Nonsense, with its corollary carols - inimitable and refreshing, and perfect in rhythm ", and he goes on to tender Lear his thanks from his " idle self ". In other words, Lear's poems are an enchanting way of passing time when in an indolent mood, because they combine aesthetically satisfying form with a lack of any distracting content, while remaining entirely harmless. They isolate, in Victorian terms, one side of poetry, the more appealing side : they retain the dreamy, enchanting, evocative flow of pleasant sound, while avoiding the serious, elevating and morally strenuous aspect of poetry, and thus provide ideal entertainment for the man of sensibility when he does not feel quite up to elevation. The nonsense is, in consequence, dealt with by simply applying to it one side of the apparatus of contemporary literary criticism, the side dealing only with matters of form, metre, the subtle powers of words, and so on.

The early study by Emile Cammaerts, Poetry of Nonsense (2), typifies this approach, but it is also to be found in the essays of most writers on Lear belonging in taste to the Victorian or Edwardian eras (3). There is a sense that the essence of poetry is mysterious, otherworldly, illogical in that it is made up of evocation regardless of statement - hence that it is a little nonsensical. Lear is valued as a kind of demonstration skeleton of a poet, stripped of any pretence at serious statement of the kind that requires assent or dissent, stripped of the consideration of life that, though necessary to great poetry, is not in itself poetic, so that Lear's works contain a purer sort of poetry than most greater

poets.A.E.Housman,in his essay on The Name and the Nature of Poetry (4) argues that prose sense is foreign to true poetry,and considering the song of Shakespeare's from Measure for Measure (Act IV,scene i.) :

> Take,O take those lips away
> That so sweetly were forsworn
> And those eyes,the break of day,
> Lights that do mislead the morn :
> But my kisses bring again,bring again;
> Seals of love,but sealed in vain,sealed in vain.

Housman claims,with some justification,that "this is nonsense,but it is also ravishing poetry ".(5).It is this equation that lies,explicitly or otherwise,behind such attitudes to Lear.

It is easy to see that just as Lear's poetry,in one of its aspects,represents an extreme form of a certain sort of Romantic lyric,so the view that " ravishing Poetry " not only may be,but in its purest forms is likely or certain to be, " nonsense ",represents an extreme form of the taste that relished such poetry,that placed Shelley with Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton on a greatest of the great list (6); however,to value poetry primarily as incantation tends to impoverish critical discussion,since quite apart from regarding true poems as ineffable,the proponent of this view tends to disregard the detailed inner life that distinguishes one poem from another,in favour of a very general response, common to many,if not all,good poems.It is possible to read The Dong with a Luminous Nose solely for its heavy,echoing euphony,combined with the vague sense of a fated creature carrying out its sad destiny,and the poem encourages such a reading - Lear was,after all,a very early enthusiast for Swinburne.But such a reading takes Lear's term " nonsenses " too much at face value,and excludes large areas of the poems.The inner meaning

of a poem by Lear does not communicate itself in the same way as that of a sonnet of Shakespeare,but that is no reason to insist that such a meaning is not present.

This sort of view did Lear harm as well as good.Few of even the most ardent proponents of the essential irrationality of poetry were able to go the whole way and appraise a poem solely on its sonorousness and atmosphere,wholely regardless of subject matter; no-one wants to be regarded as a frivolous idiot,and so it was essential to such discussions of Lear that he be kept to a sphere wholly different from that of serious poetry.Thus Ruskin is able to place Lear's book first in his list - not merely high on it - because Lear is not seen as competing with the " great writers ".One can detect in The Poetry of Nonsense and in similar studies a certain feeling of guilt,due to the writer's awareness that he is fonder of The Owl and the Pussycat than he ought,as a serious being,to be,and that this fondness is due to something in the poem that his own explanations do not cover,something beyond Lear's obvious mastery of the resources of English prosody, and more than merely the pleasant sense of a holiday from rational forms and the compulsions of real life (7).This uneasiness led to another view of Lear,also essentially Romantic,with which I will deal in the next section.

There is a good deal of value in an analysis of Lear's verse in purely formal terms,and such an analysis is far from foreign to Lear's own way of thinking; all of his poems undoubtedly owe a good deal of their charm and effectiveness to Lear's skill in handling the English language,to his metres and details of metrical practice,to his assonances and alliterations,and his sense of theevocative power of words (of have already gone into matters of form to some degree in Part 2,and will further in individual discussions of poems).It would be foolish,too,to deny the importance of atmosphere in his poems; but the

atmosphere of a given poem ought to considered as colouring the essential incidents,and hence as a pointer to the poem's various meanings.Atmosphere,in other words,is as functional as diction or any other constructive element; the poems were not written merely to contain the atmospheres ,as seems to be the case with a good deal of Tennyson's verse.However eccentric their method may be,the nonsense songs are unified poetic statements,whose content is only superficially trivial,and to consider them as pure expressions of one side of the poetic spirit is both to under-rate and to over-rate them,and certainly to see only one side of their nature.

References :

(1) See the section,Lear and Word-games ,note (1).

(2) See the section,Lear,Folk-poetry and Nursery Rhyme,note (1).

(3) For example,Peter Quenell's essay on Lear in The Singular Preference (London,1953).

(4) A.E.Housman, The Name and the Nature of Poetry (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge,1940)

(5) Housman, The Name and the Nature of Poetry, p. 41.

(6) A statement found in the introductions to a number of old volumes of Shelley's works,for example : " Chaucer,Shakspeare(sic),Milton, Shelley - these are,I believe,the four sublimest sons of song that England has to boast of among the mighty dead ", the opening clause of W.M.Rossetti's introduction to The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, edited by William Michael Rossetti (Ward,Locke & Co; London 1879), p.xi.

(7) The nonsense reflects " the workings of the mind of the child, his spontaneous challenge to the dictates of Reason,his hostility to the well-ordered world to which " grown-ups " vainly endeavour to introduce him,his suspicion of human laws and restrictions which tend gradually to transform his " play " into " work "; Cammaerts, Poetry of Nonsense,p. 18.

Part Three : Biographical Criticism.

The criticism of Lear's poetry advanced to its next stage with the discovery that the misfortunes of Lear's creatures often bear a marked resemblance to those of their creator; this view is a natural consequence of the feeling that there is something of more significance in the poems than their surfaces would suggest. Those who held his poems to be pure fantasy in irreproachable verse had ignored the sense of pathos, even of tragedy, in poems like The Dong with the Luminous Nose, or the violence and grotesquery of some of the limericks, which in both cases seem disproportionate to their ostensible subjects. To obtain an explanation for these intensities of feeling, recourse to the theory of poetry as self-expression was an obvious step. I cannot say exactly when or by whom this way of looking at Lear was originated, certainly it had reached full growth by 1941, when S.A. Nock could claim that Lear alone among nonsense writers " wrote his autobiography in his nonsense "(1).

Such a view is obviously capable of refinement, and of development in various directions. From early accounts which (2) mention briefly the circumstances of Lear's real life from which the pathos of his works, or the feelings associated with particular figures in them, are seen to derive, this method grew in sophistication with the progress of literary criticism generally, to very precise accounts of specific poems in relation to specific events in the biography, and specific psychic traumas identifiable in the life seen as leading motifs in the work (3). Thomas Byrom's recent book Nonsense and Wonder, for example, (4) considers the whole of Lear's work, including the most sheerly playful of the limericks, in terms of a theory of Lear's personal development, relating the nonsense to the biography and also the paintings in an interesting and persuasive way. His approach

relies on detailed consideration of the text in terms of both known biographical detail (finding reflections of Lear's sister Anne,his childhood circumstances,his embarrasment about his epilepsy,for example) and of psychological theories,treating the work as if it were a patient's dream (thus the Dong's huge nose is not only a parodic version of Lear's own large and shapeless nose,of which he was abnormally conscious,but also the grandiose phallic fantasy of a man who in reality had " only a plaintive pipe to play with " (5)).As I have said,this section is not intended as a concise history of Lear criticism (such a history would fill a much shorter volume than this one),and so I will treat the general possibilities and implications of biographical methods,using particular works only for illustative purposes.

When one approaches Lear's work with a view to biographical analysis,one is confronted with an embarrasment of suggestive material,and two poems,those that were not published in either Nonsense Songs,Stories,Botany Pictures and Alphabets (1871) or Laughable Lyrics (1877),that are openly concerned with the author himself,Incidents in the Life of my Uncle Arly,and the poem beginning " How pleasant to know Mr. Lear." The main source of information about the life is the published letters,and these (6) give evidence on almost every page of Lear's propensity for dealing with the problems of his existence by means of the verbal tricks and flights of whimsical fantasy characteristic of the nonsense.He constantly avoids seriousness by a joke or a comical mis-spelling : " A man can but "try" and the mere act of "trying" goes a long way to stave off mental and fizzicle maladies " (7).Or he will give harmless vent to extravagant desires or despairs by means of a lapse into nonsense idiom,as when he speculates on the possibility of selling his illustrations to Tennyson's poems for £18,000 and decides that with the rewards he will buy a " chocolate coloured carriage speckled with gold,driven by a coachman in green vestments and

silver spectacles wherein sitting on a lofty cushion composed of muffins and volumes of the Apocrypha " , he will " disport himself all about the London parks to the general satisfaction of all pious people " (8).This is so close in tone to the nonsense stories,that it is tempting to regard the published nonsense as a continuation of the same defensive use of language, and hence to see the poems too as versions of situations from the life,versions treated with Lear's powers of fantasy and subtle euphemism in order to make them more palatable than the reality on which they are based.And it is with this sort of supposition that a biographical interpretation begins.

Two approaches are possible.In the first,one looks for close correlations between the poems and specific events in the biography,in the second,one traces general patterns of psychic disturbance observable in the life; some poems seem to suit the first approach,others to be analysable only in general terms.I want to consider four poems,of which two, The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo and The Dong with a Luminous Nose, are of the first sort,and two, The Duck and the Kangaroo and The Pobble Who Has No Toes, are of the second.The analyses are partly drawn from a variety of sources (9) and partly from my own reading of the biographies (10) ; the aim is a general appraisal of the usefulness of such methods,which have been applied to most of the nonsense songs,and even,in Thomas Byrom's study,to the limericks and other nonsense.

In the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo,the hero is an ugly,solitary creature,drawn with an enormous head but a small,turned-up nose of the sort that Lear often gives himself in his more affectionate self-caricatures,who becomes enamoured of a certain Lady Jingly Jones - not one of Lear's more imaginative names - and,tired of his lonely life,asks her to marry him.She refuses,but explains that she already has a husband back in England,otherwise she would have accepted,since she finds him most appealing in spite of his

unorthodox physical appearance; at this the Bo (the Yonghy ?) takes to a turtle's back and departs forever to the Western Isles, leaving the Lady unendingly and inconsolably sorrowing.Now in Lear's diaries and letters to his friends,we find that,for not quite the first time,he has been seriously considering marriage, to a lady named Augusta Bethell,who would,his biographers agree have accepted him,but after some years of his indecision and inability to come out and ask,she finally married someone else, perhaps largely to Lear's relief,though he makes a show of self-pity,since he had used every excuse imaginable to put off a proposal.The differences between this story and that of the Bo are suggestive,in general tilting the story in the favour of the male half.There is a failure to marry,and life-long regret,but Lear's regret,which must have been largely self-reproach for his own cowardice,is transferred to the lady,and it is nobody's fault,because the Bo has proposed,so that Fate alone is responsible. Lear unites two pleasant ideas : Augusta would have accepted him if he had asked,would not have been put off by his ugliness or illness,but at the same time the marriage,which he feared as much as desired ,never occurs,and the hero is last seen in a pleasingly noble and tragic role.Further,there is the slightly malicious suggestion that the lady's actual husband,a banal " Handel Jones,Esquire ",is a far worse bargain,belonging to a plebeian world rather than the world of poetry and mystery that the Bo inhabits - all this as if Lear,in the process of persuading himself that no rejection has occurred,cannot refrain from taking revenge for the rejection he feels has occured.

The poem can be seen as manifesting a sort of compromise between the reality principle and the pleasure principle, admitting just enough of the truth to satisfy the conscience, but obscuring enough of it to salve the self-regard.The very specific nature of proposals of marriage makes this close comparison possible,and one is tempted to apply similar methods

to the other poem in the same collection that deals with failure in love, The Dong with a Luminous Nose, a poem whose strong and personal tone early suggested a biographical interpretation (11). The melancholy of the poem is found to correspond closely to the melancholy of Lear's life, as this was expressed in his letters and diaries, and the Dong's preternatural nose can be seen as evidence of a wry self-identification on Lear's part. The nose has even more significance, though; it is a kind of reductio ad absurdum of the sublime affliction of any Romantic hero, and hence the Dong can be seen as the self-parodying last in the line of Romantic self-dramatizations of the kind to be found in Alastor or parts of Childe Harold.

Here however we have reached a greater level of generality, because it is impossible to show any particular circumstance in Lear's life to correspond to the Dong's predicament. There does not, in other words seem to have been any particular Jumbly-girl, of either sex, whom Lear lost and for whom he unceasingly searched, so the emphasis falls instead on the general feelings that may be found in documentary evidence, or reasonably guessed at from the external life. Lear was virtually abandoned by his mother, and seems to have had strong homosexual feelings towards two of his close male friends, who did not reciprocate, and were not inclined to devote as much of themselves to Lear as he did to them. In this way Lear can be seen as the Dong, searching, not for a love he has known and lost, but for the love he can imagine, but despairs of bringing into being, and at the same time, for a mother, and the idyllic happiness that he associates, in Romantic fashion, with childhood :

> Happily, happily passed those days !
> While the cheerful Jumblies staid;
> They danced in circlets all night long,
> To the plaintive pipe of the lively Dong,
> In moonlight, shine or shade. (ll. 40-44.)

Nonetheless, the argument has been somewhat weakened, and the question arises of the usefulness of adding such data to a

poem that already clearly expresses the feelings involved, without requiring explanation of the author's circumstances, and that do not really gain in complexity of meaning when these circumstances are known.Other poems that suggest a biographical interpretation - and they include The New Vestments, The Daddy Long-legs and the Fly, The Nutcracker and the Sugar-Tongs, The Jumblies and The Quangle Wangle's Hat ,as well as the two I shall discuss - must be discussed at a still greater level of generality, and seen as the outcome of general areas of turbulence in Lear's emotional life,rather than as poetic discussions of specific events, or even ,in some cases,to any kind of occurence identifiable in the life.

The Duck and the Kangaroo can still be seen as a drama representing the essence of a particular emotional problem : that of his close male friendships,particularly those with Chichester Fortescue and Franklin Lushington,both of whom accompanied Lear on his travels for lengthy periods.Just as Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo may present an improved version of Lear's failure to marry,so this poem is an improved version of his travels with male friends, with the difference that here Lear allows himself pure happiness, rather than the noble but unhappy fate he produced for the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo ;

> And who so happy, - O who,
> As the Duck and the Kangaroo ?

The duck,tired of its lonely life,decides to ask the kangaroo to be allowed to ride on his back,since by itself it could never get out of its "nasty pond",and after some initial objections the kangaroo agrees and the two go hopping off together in harmonious and unbounded tourism.I call the duck "it" because,in spite of the masculinity of the term,the duck seems to be the female half of the pair,the helpless admiring one,content to be carried about by her "own dear true / Love of a kangaroo " ; and

yet it is mentioned,that in order to keep up the body temperature, the duck will undertake to smoke a daily cigar,not a very lady-like practice.The confusion is added to by the fact that,in an atmosphere of pleasant,platonic companionship,the duck refers to the kangaroo not as "my friend",but as "my love".The poem can be seen in this way as reflecting Lear's ambivalent experiences,in which the conventional notion that what he was enjoying was simple male friendship contradicted the private feeling that it was something more.There is the suggestion of personal difficulties similar those Lear experienced : the kangaroo is somewhat condescending in his superiority and power,and at first objects to the duck's cold feet.But everything is solved,here by self-sacrifice on the duck's part,just as the sexual and nonsexual aspects of the relationship are kept in a charmed balance.Lear is imagining the perfect personal harmony he has hoped for,combined with the endless and effortless travel he seemed to need.His love for his male friends,and feeling of inferiority in comparison,becomes a sense of their power,a power he wishes to humbly share; this would be possible,he feels,if he could make sufficient changes in himself to accomodate himself to their wishes.If he could do this harmony and happiness would be assured.

The poem then is seen as the distillation of a whole area of Lear's experience,providing a fanciful solution to a pressing problem.The Pobble Who Has No Toes cannot be interpreted so literally,but requires the kind of analysis that uncovers symbolic layers of meaning by examining those characters, objects or situations in the poem that seem to be imbued with the emotional energy of a conflict in the author's mind.The mysterious nature of the poem's action - the Pobble swims out into the ocean with the toe-protection suggested by his Aunt Jobiska,but loses this,whereupon his toes are removed by person or persons unknown - encourages the observer to look for deeper

meanings that would help to clarify the surface action.Like Gogol's The Nose ,this poem looks irresistibly like a castration-anxiety fantasy; Thomas Byrom comments,noticing the poem's colour adjectives - "lavender water tinged with pink", "scarlet flannel", "Cat with crimson whiskers" - that the " poem is swimming in blood ! " (1).And the Pobble's Aunt tells him, before his loss,that

' It's perfectly known that a Pobble's toes
' Are safe, - provided he minds his nose. '

This recalls the Dong's nose,and Lear's preoccupation with this feature,which can be interpreted in a phallic manner.Taking this as a starting point,it is easy to draw out the most subtle implications from the poem.Lear was brought up by a sister some twenty years older than himself,too old to be a sibling, but too unambiguously benevolent to be a mother,hence,in the poem, she becomes an aunt.The aunt knows best,and the Pobble dicovers this by experience,after having earlier said " fish fiddle de-dee " to her warnings.But his accident is not a catastrophe; rather it enables him to give up responsibility and return to his childhood world of cosseting,from the open sea.He

Was placed in a friendly Bark,
And they rowed himback,and carried him up
To his Aunt Jobiska's Park.

Which seems full of the memory of the pleasant,helpless security experienced in childhood illnesses.And his Aunt reassures the Pobble that " Pobbles are happier without their toes ".In other words,a childhood rebellion ends disastrously, and yet this is the desired ending since it makes possible a return to the security of indulgent authority.At the same time,the loss that it suffered is loss of masculinity,so that the Pobble's venture is also the growth to sexual maturity,with the problems involved,and the castration a desired return to an

age of innocence and ignorance - " Pobbles are happier without their toes ". Also noteworthy is the way in which Lear approximates to childhood experience.Aunt Jobiska's prescription of a nose-flannel to protect the Pobble's toes,and the mystery surrounding their loss

> (Whether the shrimps or the crawfish gray
> Or crafty mermaids stole them away -
> Nobody knew; and nobody knows
> How the Pobble was robbed of his twice-five toes !)

seem to reflect the child's perception of those areas of the world,and of the causes of things,that are known to him only through the explanations of his elders,whether these reports are entirely trustworthy,or of the stork-and-chimney variety.Hence a picture is built up,by means of the associations of words with characteristic kinds of experience and of feeling,of a recognizable world beyond the nonsense nomenclature of " Aunt Jobiska ", " Pobble ", " open sea ", " loss of toes ", and so on,the reader drawing on his own experience of the feelings that surround particular phases of experience in the poem,to fill in the gaps,and,so to speak, make " sense " out of the " nonsense ".

The question is,of course,whether it brings any advantage to assume that the world perceptible beyond the poem is identical to,or at least grows out of,Lear's private world.The Pobble Who Has No Toes stands at the furthest remove,among those poems I have discussed,from the close relationship to the biography that can be traced in The Courtship of Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo,but it is still possible to see it as a reflection of Lear's actual experience,and this interpretation has the attraction

of conferring a serious content on the poems,and of doing this in a simple and readily appreciable way.For if the adventures of Lear's mythical characters are not,in themselves,a fitting occupation for the minds of serious people,these same adventures can be much dignified if seen as the covert biography of an intelligent,perceptive and sympathetic man struggling with many of the problems,both personal and metaphysical,that the reader faces,or that he at least will acknowlege to have been pressing issues for Lear himself.

However this approach has a number of drawbacks : it tends to distort the value of the work; it tends to degenerate into gossipy interest in the man as a substitute for,instead of as an adjunct to,interest in and analysis of the work; and finally it adds nothing,in my opinion,to our knowledge of either Lear or his poetry,but tends merely to " multiply them by each other ",so to speak. To enlarge on the first mentioned drawback, it is a fact that while the earlest writers on Lear considered the limericks to be his essential and most original creation,these were largely ignored by later writers,because their bareness of atmosphere or props,and their tendency to deduce the wildest consequences logically from arbitrarily absurd situations,makes them them at once too simple and too bizarre to be amenable to biographical methods of criticism,unless the critic,like Thomas Byrom,is willing to entertain a very dubious premise,that that whole body of nonsense makes systematic use of certain symbols and persons (old man young woman,foreign person,and so on),that seem to be used merely at random and where necessary.Limericks that <u>do</u> project a strong personal feeling,like the following,with it's suggestion of that figure

beloved of the twentieth century,the sensitive,visionary artist persecuted and destroyed by society,have been given a greater prominence than they deserve,a prominence that the nature of the limerick does not support.

> There was an Old Man of Whitehaven
> Who danced a quadrille with a raven
> But they said - " It's absurd,to encourage this bird ! "
> So they smashed that Old Man of Whitehaven.

Such limericks are neither better nor worse than the more usual sort,for the value of the limerick does not depend on this criterion.Second,the whole nature of biographical criticism of Lear,who was not backward in coming forward with personal details,and on whom there is a wealth of biographical material,turns toward the man rather than the work.Students of Lear are exactly that,not students of Lear's poetry; the poetry becomes just an excuse for making the acquaintance of the simpatico Mr. Lear,whom it is " pleasant to know ".The difficulty is that an interest,sociological or simply personal,in Lear himself,is no better served by the work than work is served by such interest.The privileged communication that one might hope to find in the work turns,in every case to a mere paraphrase of material found in a far more precise form elsewhere.One of the best reasons for embarking on biographical criticism is that Lear was, demonstrably,something of a compulsive confessor,but for this very reason the works themselves make a very poor source of information in comparison to the letters,and even the remarks of those who knew the man.

And here we touch on the third drawback.The whole progress of a biographical critique of Lear depends on the discovery in the life of combinations of event and atmosphere - landscapes,let us say - that

correspond to passages in the poetry,much as a traveller makse use of a map because the marks on it correspond to features in the landscape.But a map does not tell one anything about the landscape that direct observation would not have revealed,any more than the landscape tells one anything about the map.The very nature of the nonsense,which makes it such a s to require " interpretation " from biographical sources,means that the contributmon of the nonsense itself to such an interpretation will be quite negligible,and the interpretation will be merely a restatement of the information on Lear already known,interrupted by occasinnal pointing out,for justification,of landmarks in the work.And this adds nothing to the work ; the fact that certain biographical comparisons can be made in The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo for example means per se that the atmosphere of a certain kind of event is clear enough in the work to make such comparison unnecessary for its illumination.If we can clearly perceive that the poem is about rejection in love,and represents an attempt to overcome rejection in a vague finale of nobility and tragic exit,what does it help us to know that there are parallels in Lear's life for that sort of thing ? And if we can't perceive this in the nonsense itself,how can we relate it to the life in this way ? The subtle edges of such rejection in the life and in the work in fact blurr each other ; detailed consideration of that in the work will teach us much about it,as will detailed consideration of that in the life,but precisely because of this neither will tell us anything reliable about the other.

An analogy to this exists in the biography itself.There is a story,repeated by most of his biographers,that during Lear's childhood, his father's business went bankrupt,causing an exodus of the vast family from their former comfortable surroundings to debtor's prison for the

father,work for the older children,and general hard times for everyone an account embroidered with various edifying details,depending on the credulity of the biographer,such as the fact that Mrs. Lear,in spite of her straitened circumstances,was able to send her husband a full three course meal in prison (she chose dwellings down the road) or that no fewer than four of the elder sisters (he had plenty to spare) actually died within a matter of months of the hardships of a governess's life.(13).There is another story,that Lear had a Danish ancestor named Løer,who anglicized his name (14) and from this ,conclusions have been drawn (15) -after all, Hans Christian Anderson....And yet according to research into the actual information,Lear is simply a good old English name,always spelt L-e-a-r (16) so that Lear apparently invented his Danish ancestor for the benefit of his correspondent.The only source for the Bankruptcy story is also an anecdote in a letter of Lear's own (17),and while I obviously have no access to evidence,I suspect that,though it has long been the cornerstone of accounts of Lear's early childhood,and used to account for his sense of isolation and transitoriness,it is either a pure fabrication,or based so distantly on truth as to be of no use for compiling a biography.Lear was simply trying to invent a pathetical anecdote,and in a way familiar in the nonsense,he couldn't prevent the development of the most distant and unbelievable details - the sisters' dropping like flies,and the dinner as usual." Simply trying to invent " is a useful phrase for a great deal of Lear's nonsense,and here we have an additional problem: not only is the inventionsuspect in itself,but it is also regarded as encoded,so to speak.The inventions may tell us something about various impulses in Lear at the time of writing,or they may be uninterpretably whimsical,and

either way the result is the same.Just as,in his anecdote,Lear merely tries to create a certain atmosphere of pathos,but seems unable to avoid an excursion of pure imagination that preserves those features that move the reader's feelings,and jettisoning everything connected with plausibility, so in his nonsense he cannot avoid keeping this same element,the moving resemblance to real life,in even the most completely removed imaginings. But it is the value of his nonsense that no further connection need be made; the world it creates is sufficiently strong to digest elements of likeness along with those of distinction.It is no less a " pure " nonsense for the fact that it relies for its material on recognizable emotional circumstance,and this fact means that the poetry must be taken even more guardedly as an indicator of the real life behind than is a purely esoteric poetry like Mallarmé's or Huidobro's that claims to require knowlege only of itself and of the meanings of words for its interpretation.This is because such material,even if derived from the creator's own life will inevitably be distorted,not in accordance with the psychic laws of the real man,but according to those of his created world itself.Then why concentrate on the material,and not simply on the laws that shaped it,and the finished product ? A painter may have used members of his own family as models for paintings,and if independent pictures or descriptions exist,this may well be proved incontrovertibly,but the fact remains of very slight importance to the painting itself.More interesting are the aesthetic and structural principles that inform the creative result; in the next section I wish to consider that approach to Lear's poetry that concerns itself with this kind of internal structure,rather than with the origins of emotional material of the nonsense.

References :

(1) S.A.Nock, " Lachrimae Nugarum Edward Lear of the Nonsense Verses ", in Sewanee Review, vol. 49, 1941 : " Among the writers of nonsense, Edward Lear seems to have been unique in writing in nonsense his emotional biography ".

(2) For example,two articles, Nock's " Lachrimae Nugarum " cited above,and Jorgen Anderson,"Edward Lear and the Origin of Nonsense ", in English Studies, vol. 31, 1950,which is early in outlook if not in date especially.

(3) For example the accounts of recent general writers on Lear,such as John Lehmann, Edward Lear and his world (Thames & Hudson; London, 1977) ,or Emery Kelen, Mr. Nonsense A Life of Edward Lear (Macdonald & Jane's; London,1974), who inherit this sort of attitude to Lear as a tragic,Romantic figure,a sort of nonsense Schubert,an attitude which no doubt owes its popularity to a well-known poem of W.H.Auden's.

(4) Thomas Byrom, Nonsense and Wonder The Poems and Cartoons of Edward Lear (Dutton,Brandywine Press; New York,1977).

(5) Byrom,Nonsense and Wonder, p. 177.

(6) Letters of Edward Lear, edited by Lady Strachey of Sutton Court (Books for Libraries Press; Freeport N.Y., 1970,from an original edition of 1907), and Later Letters of Edward Lear, edited by Lady Strachey of Sutton Court (Books for Libraries Press; Freeport N.Y., 1971, from an original edition of 1911).

(7) Later Letters of Edward Lear, p. 234.

(8) Later Letters, p. 215. Note that the pagination of the original editions,as used by Noakes for example,differs from that of these reprints.

(9) Thomas Byrom and Dieter Petzold (Formen und Funktionen der Englishen Nonsense-Dichtung im neunzehnten Jahrhundert (Hans Carl; Nurnberg,1972)),give easily the most thoroughgoing accounts,although the latter work,as its title suggests,tends to start more from purely literary analysis.

(10) Davidson, Edward Lear Landscape Painter and Nonsense Poet,and above all, Noakes, Edward Lear The Life of a Wanderer .

(11) For example Robert Graves talked about Lear himself endlessly " searching for his lost Jumbly girl ".

(12) Byrom, Nonsense and Wonder, p. 186.

(13) " The girls were put out to work as governesses,and within four months,four of them had died from sudden hardships ", Noakes, Edward Lear, p. 17. On the whole story,this biographer comments " This tradition seems to be based on truth,but is a colourful exaggeration ".

(14) " " My Danish grandfather ", says Edward Lear, " picked off the two dots and pulled out the diagonal line and made the word ' Lear ' ", Davidson, Edward Lear p. 3.

(15) By Davidson,for example; another writer suggested that the nonsense sprang from Lear's combination of Danish and Celtic personality traits, but for the life of me I can't find that reference.

(16) Noakes, Edward Lear, pp. 13-14 : " Lear seldom spoke of his family,and what little he said was misleading "; here Noakes gives a true account of Lear's origins.

(17) This was a family tradition of the Learg,recorded in letters of Edward's to his sister Anne,now lost; see Noakes, Edward Lear, p. 320, note 12 to the first chapter.

Part Three : Structural Criticism.

If biographical criticism homes in on the element of Romanticism in Lear,and,concentrating on the Nonsense Songs,sees the poetry as a special form of Romantic lyric,this critical method homes in on the elements of nursery rhyme and verbal play,and tends to have greater sympathy with the limericks." Nonsense ",in fact,is taken to mean these elements specifically,while the expressive,emotional side of the nonsense is taken to be extraneous,am adulteration of pure nonsense.This approach has the advantage of concentrating on those things that differentiate Lear from his contemporaries,from,for example,Tennyson,and the even greater advantage of attending to an objective phenomenon,the unique characteristics of Lear's use of language,as distinct from any other use of it,and hence suggests a valuable analytical method,rather than relying,as biographical criticism tends to do,on psychological or documentary material not germane to the nonsense as such.Further,it can explain the peculiar nature of much of the nonsense,of the peculiar pleasure that is derived from it,because it recognizes fully the element of pure play,pure verbal invention without expressive overtones,and, instead of throwing up the hands at this,regarding it as inaccessible to analysis because of its arbirary nature,takes it as the starting point of its critical method.

The best,and certainly still the most thorough,exemplar of this critical method,is Elizabeth Sewell in her book The Field of Nonsense,still in many ways the best critical book on Lear (1),and it is from her work especially - because it constitutes a systematic use

of the method,showing,by a complete working-out,its strengths and its limitations - that material for this section has been mostly drawn. The essence of the attitude embodied in the book is that the nonsense of Lear (and of Carroll) is play with language,differing from more serious language in the same way that play differs from ordinary activities; to quote a working definition given in the book itself :

> GAME : the active manipulation,serving no useful purpose,of a certain object or class of objects,concrete or mental,within a limited field of space and time and according to fixed rules,with the aim of producing a given result. (2)

From this attitude a complete analysis of the nonsense can be evolved. It is clear,to begin with,that no value will be attached to expressive matters,and questions such as, Why should Lear have written such a poem,what need in him does it express,will be regarded as quite irrelevant,while effort will,instead,be focussed on the discovery of the rules and structure of the particular game with language Lear is playing.This amounts,like biographical criticism,in the end to an attempt at uncovering the structure and nature of the nonsense,but, unlike biographical criticism,it assumes that the nonsense is a self-contained and self-explanatory structure,like a board-game,not one that, like a cryptogram or a roman-à-clef,requires solving,by the use of material outside itself : in other words it attempts to analyse the nonsense rather than to decipher it.

Clearly this is more difficult than it sounds; a structure of words presents,to the person intent on regarding it just as a structure of words,the blank face of a thing-in-itself,not seeming to call for any comment,or reward any attempt at breaking it up into any sort of component part.What would be useful is some sort of analogue, to provide recognizable details of structure from which an anlysis can begin,much as recognizable figurations can be the start of an analysis

of an alien form of music,and this sort of basis is provided by nursery rhyme,which clearly can be regarded as a game with words in the strict sense of the term. Nursery rhyme,then,gives the all-important clue that begins an unravelling of the nonsense,by providing details that can be recognized in Lear's nonsense,details which suggest the nature of nonsense play.A good example is the use of numbers,another the notions of cause and effect,and a third the sort of association of things that goes on in the nursery rhymes.

Numbers used in nursery rhyme are invariably quite precise,there is never any vague reference to " a great number " or whatever :

> Gregory Griggs,Gregory Griggs,
> Had twenty-seven different wigs (3)
>
> There was an old woman tossed up in a basket
> Seventeen times as high as the moon (4).

Lear does the same sort of thing :

> She walkedseventy miles,and leaped fifteen stiles,
> Which astonished that girl of Majorca.
>
> ... contained only a single tree, 503 feet tall.
>
> ... she proceeded to insert all the feathers,two hundred and sixty in number,in her bonnet.

And so on (the last two examples are from The Four Little Children, which contains no fewer than sixty-seven similar examples).The nonsense effect of this precision where no true precision could be possible,is obvious enough,as is the way in which the proceedure has been derived from nursery rhyme; but it is of more significance than that.This habit of precision extends beyond the use of numbers and covers most of the nonsense world; in a passage I have referred to a number of times,Lear tells us precisely what the Jumblies took with them,altough none of it is ever heard of again; and the limericks are full of this sort of pointless, impossible specification,as when the old man of Blackheath adorns

himself with " lobsters and spice,pickled onions and mice ",or the old person of Putney lives on " roast spiders and chutney ",or another performs a " quadrille with a raven ",not just a dance with a bird.In nonsense,as in the nursery rhyme,there is very seldom any resort to cliched details,or to generality (save for Lear's beloved " no end of") and this seems to be an important characteristic

This precision,however,is not the whole story of nonsense, obviously,since precision is equally essential to many kinds of serious writing.Nonsense deals with precisely defined,precisely enumerated concrete objects (never with abstractions) but deals with them in a certain way.Now we come to the matter of cause and effect,one of the most notably distinctive characteristics of the nursery rhyme;the reasons for events in nursery rhymes tend to be both precise and baffling,a tendency reaching its culmination in rhymes like those informing us that an Old Woman lived under a hill,and if she's not gone away,she still lives there,or that Doctor Foster determined never to go back to Gloucester after an unfortunate drenching,rhymes that tell us everything and nothing,everything we need to know to grasp the events,and nothing to let us know why we should be interested in them.In nursery rhymes the gap of causality,the bafflement,tends to be outside the rhyme,so to speak,so that we wonder how the whole thing arose in the first place.Lear takes this bafflement into the heart of the poem,into the connections normally observed between events,or between events and the feelings people have about them :

There was a Young Lady of Lucca,
Whose lovers completely forsook her;
She ran up a tree and said, ' Fiddle-de-dee ! '
Which embarrassed the people of Lucca.

There was an old person in grey,
Whose feelings were tinged with dismay;
So she purchased two parrots,and fed them with carrots,
Which pleased that old person in grey.

Along with this sort of limerick,there is the sort closer to nursery rhyme, where the relevant question is not so much, What's the connection?,as Why are you telling me all this?:

> There was an Old Man on a hill,
> Who seldom,if ever,stood still;
> He ran up and down,in his grandmother's gown,
> Which adorned that Old Man on the hill.

In either case,the combination of the precise description of the action, with the arbitrariness of its occurence,and of the way in which one thing leads to another,certainly gives the impression of a game,in which the counters are things,things more than events,and the object is to combine them in the oddest and most curiously appealing ways possible; in other words,the structure of logical discourse is to be preserved, but not its content,so that one thing leads to another quite regularly, but not for any understandable reason.

In other words,narrative is less important than the association of ideas,sheer verbal inventiveness.The nursery rhyme delights in assembling a plethora of odd things,places and names,and seems to accept any excuse,or none at all,for doing this,as in the list of presents given on the twelve days of Christmas, the materials used to build up London Bridge,the birds who take part in Cock Robin's funeral or the few but odd objects specified by briefer rhymes.Lear takes this,too,even further,and his poems are full of odd groups of things - " some honey and plenty of money "," sat in a cart and ate cold apple tart ", " fed them on snails and weighed them in scales "," feast of buttercups fried with fish "," stealing some pigs,and some coats and some wigs ",and so on.These tendencies together tell us something about the nonsense,about what kind of game it is.It is bounded by certain hazards on either side : it must not be so incomprehensible as to alienate,nor so familiar as to seem ordinary,not so serious as to be

quite interpretable,but not so humorous as to seem intended as a joke.The essence of play is that it avoids the extremes ,remaining interesting without seeming a matter of life and death,and above all, letting loose in the mind an amount of the confusion of dream or delirium, in which things are associated in strange combinations and in strange ways,and yet preserving enough rational structure to keep clear of total dissolution,of falling into the abyss prior to the separation of subject and object,in which no game is possible.Again it is the tension that matters; the nonsense keeps its integrity by coming very close to making sense,almost by pretending to do so,but retains its unique interest by not quite managing to perfect its meaning.

This theory can be used to account for most of the details of the nonsense,and is admirable as an explanation of certain points; the amorality of the limericks is one example,since,if we are dealing with a game with conceptions,clearly it does no harm if people are smashed with hammers or kicked to death,and the amusement,devoid of shock,we derive from these events,confirms this notion; another example is the close approach to parody which never really quite parodies anything, because parody,after all,is,in its own way,in earnest,and while discovery of the nonsensical possibilities of a style is permissible,to actually stoop to parody as such would break the spell.And the play with words can be seen in its simplest form in those words of baffling meaning,or lack of meaning,I have discussed in the section on Word-games : the tension must be maintained between the amount of meaning essential to the mind if it is to perceive words as interesting,characterful objects for play,and the amount of chaos,meaninglessness,necessary for game to differentiate itself from earnest.In an interesting chapter entitled The Balance of Brillig (5),Elizabeth Sewell discusses pure nonsense words and their possible explanations,giving several alternate

sources for Carrollian words such as " frumious " and " bandersnatch ", which correspond to such Learisms as runcible and Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo. She points out that each explanation is equally ingenious,and equally plausible,but that none will really " stick " to the word,or seems quite satisfying in the way that the solution to a cipher should,an impression that anyone who has ever searched for the meaning of such words will confirm.This is the essence of play : that it should retain as many features as possible of serious activity (as chess retains an atmosphere of battle),and yet differentiate itself from this,and offer instead the amusement of pure structure,of formal relations elaborated and enjoyed for their own sake.Nonsense is a game of this kind that depends on the usual notion of language,as a medium for the communication of ideas and reports of events.The limericks retain the atmosphere of factual report,but in fact dissolve this much further than usual fiction,because their essence consists in playing,indifferently and detachedly,with all the oddest possibilities that this suggests. The pleasure of the structure of report has been separated from the content on which such things depend,and to enjoy the limericks we must cultivate a faculty of impractical play comparable to that required by listening to music; they are a sort of music of events,working out the possibilities of these not by rules of causality and expected associations derived from the real world to which the objects once belonged,but by formal rules,based on the pleasure the mind takes in certain combinations and relations,in certain suggestions and atmospheres, regardless of the usual concommittants of these things.

It is significant,however,that most of the examples in The Field of Nonsense,are taken from Carroll,or if from Lear,from the

limericks rather than from what one would be excused for regarding as his more characteristic work,the nonsense songs.In fact Miss Sewell develops her theory so consistently that she feels able to say (6) that certain poems of Lear's are failures as nonsense.This is the case because poems like The Dong with a Luminous Nose and The Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo invite emotional involvement and hence destroy the detachment of the mind that is absolutely essential to this game.We cannot enjoy the limericks as a game if we must identify with the victims of violent death,or even those of random rearrangements of the world; it is necessary that we regard them from a distance,as objects for play.Hence Miss Sewell had two options,either to attempt to explain all the nonsense songs in terms of pure,inexpressive play,or to write them off as only partially nonsensical,and she wisely chose the latter alternative. After all,Lear himself set poems such as The Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo to melancholy music,and reportedly sang them,in a thin voice but with great expression,with tears in his eyes,just as he did with his setting of Tennyson's lyric Tears,Idle Tears.The poems themselves often enough suggest that their structure is not purely formal,depending on the rules of play,but on a desire for emotional expression,a motive not only alien to the spirit of pure play,but contradictory to it.

Must we then decide that the more expressive lyrics are only partially nonsense,in so far as they contain occasional,objective nonsense inventions such as those found in the limericks,but for the rest,have been polluted by expressive intentions that,just as surely as the moralizing intentions of Carroll's Sylvie and Bruno,destroy the nonsense by bringing in the necessities and uncertainties of the real world ? After all the essence of nonsense,in this sense,is that it is a closed world of play,which neither threatens nor consoles,because it

is sheer structure,sheer rule,with nothing of real life about it.I think,however,that an understanding of the nature of the nonsense songs, Lear's maturest creations,depends on the acceptance that they,as well as the limericks,are nonsenses;certainly Lear gave no reason to believe that they should be otherwise regarded.And yet it is equally hard to deny that such pieces do upset the perfect balance between meaning and meaninglessness required of nonsense.

The nonsense songs arose,it seems to me,when he discovered that the nonsense world,which had arisen out of sheer play,contained other possibilities.The first nonsense song,The Owl and the Pussycat, was only written years after the first book of limericks,and indeed already fully represents an entirely new conception of nonsense,one not to be found in the limericks,in Carroll,or more than occasionally in nursery rhyme.It is perhaps Lear's most perfect and beautiful creation, and I want to spend a little time on its analysis.It is easy enough to see the elements of play that offer themselves to the critic : the juxtaposition of the Owl and the Pussycat,the " pea-green boat ",the " land where the Bong-trees grow ",the marvellous nonsense of " they dined on mince,and slices of quince / Which they ate with a runcible spoon ". It is possible even to see most of the elements in the poem as similarly emotionally neutral nonsense creations; certainly the whole poem has its point of origin in those nursery rhymes about strange mixed marriages of animals,the mouse marrying the bumble-bee, or the frog the mouse,and no-one could ever suspect these as being anything but the purest playful nonsense.The poem could then be simply an expanded version of this story,with other nonsense incidents to fill it in : a nonsense version of the wedding feast and dance " hand in hand on the edge of the sand ",and the introduction of arbitrary

extras,the piggy-wig and the turkey who lived on the hill.In other words the whole poem can be seen as an expansion of the whimsy of phrases like " honey and plenty of money ", " mince and slices of quince ", which rhyme,and are likeably odd,but have no meaning beyond that,and hence are legitimate nonsense.

The impression of the reader,however,will always be that such an interpretation is incorrect,and this impression can be confirmed by asking a question.In true nonsense,it would not matter if the beautiful pea-green boat sank in the last stanza,taking the owl,the pussycat,and all hands with it; if this was handled with the élan of the limericks,and with sufficient invention in language and incident it would by no means spoil the effect of the poem. Is this in fact true ? Of course it is not; the poem depends not on arbitrary creation of incidents,but on the overall impression that is conveyed of " living happily ever after ",of innocent,paradisal happiness,as " hand in hand, on the edge of the sand / They danced by the light of the moon ". In other words the poem expresses something,but it is not necessarily a personal expression rooted in autobiography.Rather we are in the world of those select nursery rhymes I have mentioned earlier,that achieve almost accidentally a pure,expressive lyricism,the world of " Lavender's blue... " or " I had a little nut-tree... ",or to take a different example :

> Gray goose and gander,
> Waft your wings together,
> And carry the good king's daughter
> Over the one-strand river. (7)

Lear's method is obviously more conscious and focussed than these nursery rhymes,but the essential similarity remains,the conveying,by a kind of stripped-down lyricism,which has its setting in the nonsense world,of an essential feeling,a primary colour of emotional expression

a very simple paradise of domestic happiness similar to that imagined in " Lavender's blue..." .And neither is the nonsense invention merely accidental to this proceedure.This undefined,limitless happiness could only convincingly take place in the concretely nonsensical " land where the Bong-trees grow ",and the same spirit of play that produces the details of nonsense available for quotation,can here be seen playing with fundamental notions in human life itself.This is to enter on dangerous ground,and certainly to abandon the pleasures of pure structure, and in some senses to abandon play for earnest.But the origins of this poetry are still in play,and it is not as if Lear were spoiling the game by trying,like Carroll in Sylvie and Bruno ,to make its components of more significance than they can bear while remaining legitimate playthings.The pleasure the mind takes in the doings of the Owl and the Pussycat is,it is true,a pleasure of feeling rather than of structure, but this expression takes place within the nonsense world,and depends, for its full effectiveness,on a clothing of nonsense invention,to strengthen it with detail.For this reason we must see Lear's work as all of a piece,and all may as well be subsumed under the term " nonsense ", from the pure play of the limericks (or most of them),through transitional work like the prose stories of the two parts of the ruthless Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos,to the most expressive poems.

Lear's discovery was that the world of nonsense,created by playing with the possibilities of the real world,did not entirely lose the content of feeling from that world,but,because of its arbitrary, game-like structure,at once more baffling than life,and yet not at all messy,self-contradictory or unreasonable,it retained these things in a simplified form,a form which could apply equally to human couples or an Owl and a Pussycat.Thus he was able to write what are in a way

nonsense versions of serious themes,and hence can be seen,as I have suggested,as a sort of suppressed adult's poetry,and it is in this, rather than in writing his emotional biography in nonsense,that Lear is unique.Thus The Daddy Long-legs and the Fly deals with the problem of unhappiness deriving from one's unavoidable nature,The Jumblies with the discoveries that can be made by escaping from established patterns of behaviour,the Dong with the Luminous Nose is the nonsense version of the never-ending quest for spiritual satisfaction,and Calico Pie of the ubi sunt lyric.In each case the setting of these idylls or tragedies in the nonsense world does more than just express Lear's individuality in the treatment of well-worn themes.The whole reason for Lear's treatment of such themes lies in the nonsense world; there he discovered, in those fragments of experience assembled for the purposes of playing, the essential crises and wishes that govern real life.In attempting to write a version of the old marriage of animals theme,he found that it had become an idyll,distilling,as some nursery rhymes distill,all human wishes in that direction,and able to express them with perfect purity and directness precisely because of the freedom of action enjoyed in the nonsense world.Originally this freedom derived from the free manipulation of things with no rules but those of the author's play; in the Nonsense songs,it is as if he has handed over this freedom to the creatures themselves,to work out their own fates with human desires and problems.Naturally,all this occurs on the simplest level,the only level, as I have said,on which sentiments would be equally applicable to people or to nonsense creatures.All this means that in the nonsense songs we have a different sort of music from the structural music of events in the limericks; it is a music whose themes are basic notions of the course of human life,and the development is naturally determined by their nature.

References :

(1) Elizabeth Sewell, The Field of Nonsense (Chatto and Windus; London,1952).

(2) Sewell, The Field of Nonsense, p. 27.

(3) The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, p. 194.

(4) The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, p. 434.

(5) Sewell, The Field of Nonsense, pp. 115-129.

(6) Sewell, The Field of Nonsense, p. 149 : " We now come to what I have called the Nonsense failures - in Lear's case the nonsense songs such as the Dong and the Jumblies."

(7) The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, p. 190.

PART FOUR : ANALYSES OF THE NONSENSE, AND CONCLUSION.

Part Four : The Nonsense Cookery and the Story of the Four Little Children Who Went Round the World.

These two prose pieces,published in Lear's second collection, Nonsense Songs,Stories,Botany and Alphabets (1871),which also included the first of the nonsense songs,are specimens of his nonsense at its most staightforward,similar to the outbursts of invention that occur throughout his letters,but,since they are aimed at children,without the larmoyant overtones of the latter.The Nonsense Cookery especially show the mixture of mockery of anything solemn,farcical non sequitur,absurd details,and a way of mangling perfectly sensible things into bizarre shapes,that constitutes much of his uniqueness; what distinguishes him from his contemporaries,even Lewis Carroll,is the gusto of his invention which gives his prose pieces,to twentieth century eyes,a decidedly familiar appearance,since the absurd,the farcical destruction of ordinary continuities,has become a staple of humour.The recipe for Gosky patties for example is much the sort of nonsense that Spike Milligan was sometimes capable of inventing in the great days of the Goon Show (' Here, have a gorilla.' ' Thank you.' - sound of frenzied gorillas fighting - ' Ooh,these gorillas are strong,try one of my monkeys,they're milder. ') (1) :

> Take a Pig,three or four years of age,and tie him by the off-hind leg to a post.Place 5 pounds of currants,3 of sugar,2 pecks of peas,18 roast chestnuts,a candle,and six bushels of turnips,within his reach; if he eats these,constantly provide him with more.
>
> Then procure some cream,some slices of Cheshire cheese,four quires of foolscap paper,and a packet of black pins.Work the whole into a paste,and spread it out to dry on a sheet of clean, brown waterproof linen.
>
> When paste is dry,but not before,proceed to beat the Pig violently with the handle of a large broom.If he squeals,beat him again.
>
> Visit the paste and beat the Pig alternately for some days, and ascertain if at the end of that period the whole is about to turn into Gosky Patties.
>
> If it does not then it never will.

Obviously the fun here derives partly from the mimicking of the style of a genuine cook-book,but largely from the constant disruption of connected sense and the proliferation of absurd details. How could such an odd assortment of things be worked into a paste ? how can linen be clean and brown ? what is the connection between the pig and the paste ? how could one ascertain that the two are about to turn into gosky patties ? what are gosky patties,and how would one recognize them if they did occur ? and so on,each absurdity like those in children's drawings or plans,in which effects are obtained from totally innappropriate causes,in a way that shows unfamiliarity with the workings of things,the nonsensical seeming no more odd or capricious than the well-accepted.

In the Story of the Four Little Children,there is an equally striking wealth of absurd invention,as well as some excellent jokes, but here already the nonsense is being used in a more expressive way,not just for random play.The story is a nonsense version of travel-books and of adventure stories intended for children,as when the children use their ingenuity to provide themselves with life's necessities :

> Violet chiefly occupied herself with putting salt-water into a churn,while her brothers churned it violently,in the hope that it would turn into butter,which it seldom,if ever,did.

Similarly the travellers happen upon spectacles more marvellous than any the real world saw fit to provide :

> There appeared in the extreme and dim distance a single object,which on a nearer approach and on an accurately cutaneous inspection,seemed to be somebody in a large white wig sitting on an arm-chair made of Sponge-cakes and Oyster-shells.... the Quangle Wangle (who had previously been around the world), exclaimed softly in a loud voice, ' It is the Co-operative Cauliflower ' ... he had no feet at all,being able to walk tolerably well with a fluctuating and graceful movement on a single cabbage stalk...
>
> He suddenly arose,and in a somewhat plumdomphious manner hurried off towards the setting sun, - his steps supported by two superincumbent confidential cucumbers,and a large number of Waterwagtails proceeding in advance of him by three and

> three in a row - till he finally disappeared on the brink of the western sky in a crystal cloud of sudorific sand.
>
> So remakable a sight of course impressed the Four Children deeply; and they returned immediately to their boat with a strong sense of undevelop ed asthma and a great appetite.

This passage captures very well the breathless atmosphere of description from witnesses of unique and awesome events,but of course cannot take it quite seriously; however this is typical of Lear's mind.When deeply moved by Tennyson's reading of the newly completed Maud,for example,he effused,to the poet's disgust, " It's enough to make one stand on one's head! " The story is,as I have said,a nonsense version of travel literature,which does not mean a parody.Rather it recreates in its the own the sense of wonder and bewilderment at encountering strange and marvellous sights,the perception of the incredible oddness of the world,but with an unseriousness that shows Lear's great desire for sublimity leading to a fear of having claimed to have discovered it,and being proved wrong,as well as his sense of humour,as when the Blue-bottles speak " with a slight buzzing accent,chiefly owing to the fact that they each held a small clothes-brush between their teeth ".

There is also an occasional blackness in the comic invention that suggests seriousness : the children ride home on an elderly rhinoceros ,and on arrival,as a " token of their grateful adherence ", they have him killed and stuffed to act a doorscraper (sic).There are similar moments throughout the nonsense,as when the hero of The New Vestments has stockings made of skins, " but it is not known whose "; in the nonsense animals are often treated as people so that any skin would be someone's.Lear was,after all,a gluttonous and compulsive traveller,and must have come across as many nasty things,disturbing to his very Victorian-English way of feeling,as sublime,wonderful things, and it is his strength that he is able to make nonsense out of both,

without any sense of strain.The model for this is,of course,the robustness of nursery rhymes and traditional children's stories like those of the Grimm brothers' collection,in which the most gruesome and horrible elements are treated without horror or disgust in a way utterly unlike the children's verse written up to Lear,reflecting a matter-of-fact attitude to all aspects of life and death of great importance to Lear in keeping him clear of the sentimentality to which he was sometimes prone.

This story was,however,written for its heroes,and as such does not contain expressive material of any great complexity; even a child would find no difficulty in recognizing the emotional atmosphere of the nonsense-wonders,at once marvelling,and mocking oneself for marvelling.It s principal qualities are still the diversity,charm and unpredictable satisfactoriness of the nonsense invention itself,rather than in anything lying behind this.

Reference :

(1) ' Napoleon's Piano ', The Goon Show Scripts, Spike Milligan, edited by Jeremy Robson and Elizabeth Rose (The Woburn Press; London 1972)

Part Four : The Jumblies and The Dong with a luminous Nose.

Many writers have commented on the integrity of Lear's nonsense, its sense of providing a unified and self-consistent world.One of the main causes of this impression is the way in which a character will keep reappearing through various poems,now a subsidiary character,now the hero.Thus the Quangle Wangle begins life in The Story of the Four Little Children,in which also appear the Pobble,and the Dong; the Dong's tragedy centres around the Jumblies,who also have a poem of their own, and so on.In the refrain of The Jumblies,Lear can say " They went to sea in a sieve,they did ",as if this were a piece of widely-known mythology,and it is as mythology that his poems seem to work,give brief glimpses of what seems to be a whole world,with its own order and history, much like Emily Bronte's poems.This gives the poems an especial fascination,and makes it hard not to see them as " archetypes ",if you will excused an overworked word,that is to say,as fragments of invented experience that have very wide implications,communicating,not so much a view of life,as a distillation from a wide range of experience and feeling,both literary and general.This is why I say that the poems are " versions " of serious themes; they use nonsense to approach these things,but still everything is treated in terms of nonsense invention, there is no allegory or encoding.

After this preamble we come to The Jumblies,perhaps Lear's best poem,and his version of the Sea-Voyage in Quest of Knowlege and Redemption,as in The Ancient Mariner or the Bateau Ivre.That the poem is more or less a commentary on a well-known nursery rhyme makes it easy to begin a consideration of it.The nursery rhyme,as I have said,is

the one about the wise men of Gotham,who go to sea in a bowl,and from this Lear extracts the nonsense consequences,just as he does from the animal-marriage nursery rhyme in The Owl and the Pussycat.In the original the wise men,of course,are fools,and they are figures of ridicule,if anything.The Jumblies,however,whose enterprise is the far rasher one of going to sea in a sieve,come out of it quite well,obviously have the author's sympathy,and in the end gain everyone's respect.This shows the distance between the commonsense world of the nursery rhyme,and Lear's nineteenth century Romanticism,but the reversal of meaning is not carried out with complete conviction,and traces of the original evaluation remain.The Jumblies go to sea " in spite of all their friends could say ",and everyone knows better than them that their discomiture will follow,because " it's extremely wrong / In a sieve to sail so fast ".All of this unites the rebellion of the Romantic against society with a view,not entirely devoid of mockery,of know-it-all children's refusal to take their elders' advice,incidentally showing how close together these two things are. The Jumblies defiantly say " we don't care a button ! we don't care a fig ! ",using the typical childhood strategy of concealing," I'm right," under," I don't care anyway"; and they congratulate themselves with exaggerated praise :

' How wise we are !
Though the sky be dark and the voyage long,
Yet we never can think we were rash or wrong '

In any nursery rhyme this would be pride before a fall,and indeed in almost any children's literature outside of Lear it would precede deep humiliation and a much-needed lesson.

But the Jumblies manage to defy the laws of nature and man,and have thorough fun.Of course water must come into a sieve,but,in a marvellously dead-pan invention,Lear tells us that to overcome this hazard, they wrapped their feet in neatly folded pink paper,and hence were able to keep their feet dry.This type of non-answer,familiar from a

certain type of joke,gives us an indication of Lear's attitude,unable to avoid giving a departure from commonsense ironic treatment even when he intends to reward it,and recognizing the frequent arrogance,self-love and silliness of Byronic attitudes,even though he feels,like their perpetrators,that they lead to a fuller life than is possible to the ordinary people left behind.And it is in the depiction of this fuller life that nonsense excells.From the magical description of the voyage in stanza IV,already quoted in part :

> ' O Timballo ! How happy we are,
> When we live in a sieve and a crockery jar;
> And all night long in the moonlight pale,
> We sail away with a pea-green sail,
> In the shade of the mountains brown ! '

to the list,also quoted,of the odd and charming things they brought with them to the " land all covered with trees " (alias the Land where the Bong-trees grow),the nonsense invention fully rises to the challenge of suggesting the happiness of freedom in companionship and delighted exploration of a strange world.In a more conventional Romantic poem,the assertion of the value of personal freedom is much more powerful than any notion of what exactly is gained in such freedom, but for Lear the propriety of making a bold,unsensible step is very doubtful,while the rewards it brings are,because of the less constrained nature of nonsense,much more tangible.All such notions of gain in richness of experience must communicate the appropriate feeling,rather than factual circumstances,and this is why nonsense is so successful here.

The list of things the Jumblies brought (" a useful cart,/ And a pound of rice,and a cranberry tart...a Pig...forty bottles of Ring-Bo-Ree / And no end of Stilton Cheese ")is,however,very domestic, and this,too,suggests Lear's ambivalence,hesitating between freedom and cosiness,as a child does.It is significant that the bulk of the

adventure is skipped,and we jump forward in time to the return of the Jumblies,wiser and not at all sadder,and everyone remarks how tall they have grown,and gives them a triumphant welcome feast,and most important,approves of them by determining to go to sea in a sieve as well.Everyone says

> they've been to the Lakes and the Torrible Zone,
> And the hills of the Chankly Bore,

knowing already about these things,as if the adventure in the sieve was not so much a matter of discovery,as of doing something of which everyone else is afraid.The Jumblies,after all,are a species of their own,they are not like those around them

> Far and few,far and few,
> Are the lands where the Jumblies live.

the refrain associates with the Jumblies as such the distant,romantic glamour attributed,in the rest of the poem,to their voyaging,and the places they visit.In other words,such things are for Jumblies only, and it is in their nature to sail in sieves,and the lands where they live are,to say the least,far and few.So in the last resort the nursery rhyme scale of values provides the framework,even if it is the Romantic scale of values that is embodied in the most haunting parts of the poem.But this is a matter of feeling,not of fact,an idea,not a possibility.

In spite of these cavills,the poem remains essentially a straightforward idyll,creating in nonsense the Platonic idea of companionable but complete freedom,just as The Owl and the Pussycat did for the idea of perfect mutual love,though in a more doubtful framework here.In this straightforwardness,the poem is typical of those in Nonsense Songs.The best of these (The Owl and the Pussycat, The Duck and the Kangaroo, The Daddy Long-legs and the Fly, The Jumblies and Calico Pie) show Lear at his purest and simplest and best,

exploring the possibilities of nonsense for conveying fundamental dramas,or,as I put it a moment ago,the Platonic ideas of human situations. The poems of the next group,those published in Laughable Lyrics,tend to be more involved,and to deal more minutely with feelings,and with a central figure,rather than with the pairs and groups of the earlier volume; the nonsense moves away from nursery rhyme and towards Romantic lyric,and,having covered the basic ground of its mode of expression, elaborates on it somewhat.The best poems in this volume,and those to which the previous remarks apply,are The Quangle Wangle's Hat, The Pobble Who Has No Toes, The Courtship of the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo, and especially The Dong with the Luminous Nose,Lear's most ambitious poem,and in some opinions,his best.Why would Lear write such a poem ? It is long and a little obscure,in an elaborate irregular stanza-form,and obviously required a great deal of labour to write,but it is not in the least amusing,and certainly does not appeal to children,as many of the earlier poems still do. It is a sign of Lear's belief in nonsense as a mode of expression,and as a world,and stands as his most serious attempt to work out the full possibility of this world.

Each of the nonsense songs has a core of nonsense,a particular piece of invention,from which the poem is built up by the addition of psychological and physical description,of a wealth of detail and incidental invention; in The Dong this is the notion of a creature, searching for a lost love through the night,makes a nose out of a sort of bark,with a central space for a lamp and holes for the light to stream out - it is almost as if Lear had thought of the title first and built up the poem from this.The danger is,of course,that the whole poem can seem to be tacked on to this core,or to be irrelevant to it,and indeed there seems little essential relation between the story of lost love told of the Dong,and his building of the Nose,which,

like the Quangle Wangle's Hat,is the heart of the poem.It is the slightness of this element that gives the Dong its especial character among Lear's poems; whereas in prose pieces like The Story of the Four Little Children,the jokes and nonsense inventions come so fast that any concern for overall form is unnecessary given the compulsive fascination of each part,in this poem,there is a clear overall lyrical form and the nonsense invention has been tailored to fit this.The poem is the nonsense version of the Romantic story,as in Alastor,of a man who searches in vain for a lost love who symbolizes a lost spiritual existence.But it is a nonsense version only in that it occurs to a nonsense creature in the nonsense world,the passion itself undergoing no transformation,but only displacement.Thus the Jumblies land at " the Zemmery Fidd / Where the Oblong Oysters grow ",and the Jumbly girl of whom the Dong is enamoured is praised for her " sky-blue hands,and her sea-green hair ",the poem is,in essence,a seriously Romantic one,whose connection with nursery rhyme is really shown only by its straightforwardness of statement; few Romantic poets would be able to write

> ' Forever I'll seek by lake and shore,
> Till I find my Jumbly girl once more '.

Instead of nonsense invention,the poem relies more heavily than any of Lear's others on sonority and atmosphere,and it is the bulk of its Tennysonian passages that makes it so large.The introduction,from which I have already quoted,goes on for twenty lines before we even discover that the wandering,mysterious light is the Dong,and only at the twenty-sixth line does the scene-setting end,and we begin to be told the story of the Dong.The poem ends with a coda of eighteen lines in the same vein,from which I will quote :

And now each night,and all night long,
Over those plains still roams the Dong;
And above the wail of the Chimp and Snipe
You may hear the squeak of his plaintive pipe....
And all who watch at the midnight hour,
From Hall or Terrace,or lofty Tower,
Cry,as they trace the Meteor bright,
Moving along through the dreary night, -
' This is the hour when forth he goes;
' The Dong with a luminous nose ! '

And so on.It can be seen that the only purpose of all this is to communicate a sense of the grandeur and tragedy of the Dong's destiny - after all,why should the night be dreary,does the Dong never sally forth on balmy nights ? Obviously the adjective is atmospheric rather than informative.All this sort of thing is anathema to the nursery, and usually to nonsense; Lewis Carroll,for example,becomes insufferable and pious when he waxes lyrical.Nonsense plays with words,but with words as they represent things,and even its purely verbal humour usually springs from a realization of the content of words in contexts where this is not normally considered,as in the Blue Bottles inhabited by the Blue Bottle Flies.But here we have nonsense that relies on language itself for its effects,in other words,that trusts language,which the nonsense writer normally makes it his business not to do.

This is evidence of the development of Lear's unique conception of nonsense.From a delight in nonsense invention for its own sake,as evidenced in the limericks,deriving from nursery rhyme to a considerable extent,he moved,with the Owl and the Pussycat to the more personal area of nonsense as a means of expression,a kind of expression determined by the feeling that can be conveyed by nonsense inventions if these are consistently elaborated,in their own terms, at the length required for a complete poem,rather than a limerick. The result is a concentration on feeling,because it is the feeling that remains perfectly intelligible,even when the names are nonsensical

and the action odd.This means that in the end,the expression of feeling is likely to take precedence over the nonsense invention that originally provided a fresh field,a fresh world,for its exercise.So while the early poems clothe ideas in nonsense invention,and hence give them bite, the later poems instead concentrate on the subtleties of language that become apparent if such a means of expression is reflected on.This is what gives The Dong its appearance of parody,its concern with styles of language.Lear assumes a high Romantic tone,and cleverly obtains specific effects by varying the diction from this standard,as when the Dong charmingly and pathetically admits

> ' What little sense I once possessed
> Has quite gone out of my head ! '

or in the description of the making of the Nose,with its irresistible fun deriving from that standard form of parody,use of a tight stanza form and poetic diction to describe simple physical action :

> Of vast proportions and painted red,
> And tied with cords to the back of his head.
> - In a hollow rounded space it ended
> With a luminous Lamp within suspended,
> All fenced about
> With a bandage stout
> To prevent the wind from blowing it out.

This must be one of the funniest passages in the whole of Lear,but its purpose is confusing.Its effect is to cast doubt on the Dong as Romantic hero,and the idea of a Romantic hero,and yet such parody is not consistent with the rest of Lear's nonsense.It seems that here Lear has tried for an expansion of the field of nonsense greater than it will admit,and that the nonsense idea is disrupting a basically lyrical,serious poem,while the Tennysonisms certainly do not help the nonsense either. And yet the magic of many of the poems passages is undeniable.

This is partly because of Lear's now apparent mastery of language; both in metre,sound-effects and diction,he has complete control of the effects he will produce,so there are none of the patches of

miscalculated facetiousness of some earlier poems.But mainly it is because of the compulsion with which the (serious) main subject is treated.After all,to say that the lost love came from among the Jumblies rather than the Gipsies,is not to convert the notion into nonsense,and here it is their Romantic fascination rather than their nursery rhyme aspect that is exploited,and the refrain from The Jumblies becomes a sort of folk-song - incantation,talking,like the whole poem,it seems,in conception,about faery lands forlorn rather than the land of Bosh. However it is a mistake to think of The Dong as a failure; if many authors had written nonsense songs,it would be seen as one of a particular, uncommon sort; because only Lear wrote them,we tend to see it as a failure. It does illustrate the limits of nonsense,however.When expression becomes very detailed,very personal,it inevitably gives up the vague boundlessness that is a useful attribute of nonsense; when poetry becomes entirely involved with emotional expression,it must give up that objectivity and unconcern that are the prerequisites of good nonsense invention.Nonsense explores the world,and does not care what it finds, but romantic expression has a very definite set of objectives.Alone among Lear's poems,The Dong with a Luminous Nose seems to begin with the second motive rather than the first,and this means that its central piece of nonsense invention,the business of the Dong's nose,fits in badly.Now it seems to be the heart of the matter,now just an excuse for atmospheric writing,now an opportunity for the parody of romantic verse-styles,and this variety of treatment suggests poor integration with the emotional core of the poem.

Part Four : Calico Pie and The Quangle Wangle's Hat.

These two poems are the closest to the evocation of the startling richness of the natural world contained in the prose stories.The diversity of wild-life and landscape in the limericks is generally used to score some point of humour or bizarrerie,but cumulatively it also has the effect of communicating a sense of marvel,strangeness and bewildered delight.Some of the limericks seem to have little other purpose ; there is one that goes :

> There was an Old Person of Philoe
> Whose conduct was scroobius and wily;
> He rushed up a palm,when the weather was calm,
> And observed all the ruins of Philoe,

whose illustration is virtually identical to the drawing of Philoe Lear made in a letter at the time he was visiting this island,and marvelling at its beauty.This limerick,failing to expand much on the mere fact of such tourism,is fairly typical in its use of the visible world to provide a rich stock of nonsense hazards,adventures and simple incidents,while in the poems,Lear expresses something analogous to the content of his sightseeing,as communicated in his letters and journals. In his Indian journals,written very near the end of his life during a very uncomfortable and mishap-laden journey,he can still talk of being " nearly mad from sheer beauty and wonder of foliage ! O new palms ! O flowers ! O creatures ! O beasts ! ", or can pour out rhapsodical descriptions of the Taj Mahal.(1).In the nonsense,everything is reduced to a domestic,nursery scale,but still,the delight of the visible world and its variety is expressed as poignantly as those sorts of feeling derived from human relationships.The idyllic happiness of the owl and

the pussycat,or the sadder idyll of the daddy long-legs and the fly, both require idyllic countries as a setting,but these settings remain, if you will excuse the solecism,in the background,while the interest centres on the pairs themselves.In these two poems,however,for a variety of reasons,the nonsense world itself comes to the fore.Both poems are concerned with very general themes,the passing of all happiness in Calico Pie, and the happiness of unselfish community in The Quangle Wangle's Hat; both poems evoke a procession of different creatures,some real and some invented; both have a central figure (the "me" to whom " they never came back " in the first and the eponymous hero in the second) who is more the focus of feelings and events than an actor,who remains hidden beneath his hat,like the Quangle Wangle.Because of this combination of factors,the especial interest of both poems is in the simple enumeration of species; in itself this would be neither moving nor interesting,but it gains a depth of meaning through its place in the treatment of the main themes of the poems.

In Calico Pie, Lear shows as clearly as he ever did the effectiveness of nonsense as a means of expression.In all but its nonsense, the poem might have been written by Tennyson,with its trite ubi sunt theme and its gentle music,and above all its hauntingly obvious refrain :

Calico Pie,
The little birds fly
Down to the calico tree,
Their wings were blue,
And they sang ' Tilly-loo ! '
Till away they flew, -
And they never came back to me !
They never came back !
They never came back !
They never came back to me !

The poems simplicity does not require any labouring; the same pattern is repeated through four stanzas,for birds,fish,mice and insects,and the thing seems to be as vacuous as the opening nonsense words, Calico Pie

Calico Jam,Calico Ban and Calico Drum.Is it then,as C.M.Bowra says (2), an unintentional parody of the romantic lyric that combines charming music with an atmosphere of gentle pathos ? In fact the poem expresses sorrow at the transitoriness of happiness just as successfully as anything written by a poet between Emily Bronte and Thomas Hardy.If the poem had been unnonsensical,if it had been by Tennyson,it would probably now seem feeble,vacuous and mildly nauseating,but because it takes place in the nonsense world it remains entirely acceptable.

This is because of two things.Firstly the animals in the poem are still clearly nursery rhyme characters,the little fish takes off his hat to the sole and the sprat,the mice run to be in time for tea,and drink it all up,flippity-flup.In other words,we cannot take the poem too seriously,because it does not take itself seriously,there is no vanity or autobiography in it.And yet the nursery rhyme element adds to the pathos,as well as ensuring unpretentiousness; the atmosphere of childhood is unmistakeable,and the touch of the twee only serves to make it even more familiar,so that the poem seems a lament for a lost world of innocence,in which everything behaves in nursery rhyme fashion, for childhood itself,which never comes back.This is only suggested by the choice of words,not made open and even self-mocking as in The Dong.But the connection is clearly made between nostalgia for the things that have passed away,regret at transitoriness,which is what the poem expresses, and nostalgia for a cosy,gemütlich childhood world in which such transitoriness is,in a highly simplified perception of life,is not perceived and hence does not exist.The poem is the verbal equivalent of overenthusiastic playing with young children,and one of the few occasions (The Table and the Chair is the other) where Lear seems to lose pure nonsense invention and deliberately talks down to his child audience.But

that is an essential part of the poem's expression of this double nostagia.

The second reason lies in the fact that,as I have said,interest tends to centre on the evocation of nonsense natural history.Because each stanza is the same in form,with an identical refrain (" And they never came back,etc") the interest naturally focusses on the changing nature of the participants.With the exception of the Willeby-Wat,who comes along for the rhyme,all the creatures are commonplace,and all are stock nursery rhyme figures,so that the poem echoes nursery rhymes like those about the three blind mice,or the mice who ran up the clock (mice seem to do a lot of running, " Calico Ban / The little Mice ran "),the frog and the mouse,two little birds," Ickle ockle,blue bockle / Fishes in the sea " and so on.But all they actually do is "be themselves"; they are introduced, then we are told that they never came back,and that is that as simply as the mice run up and down the clock (for Lear they " drank it all up / And danced in the cup ").This makes the poem seem like a charm that calls all these innocent nursery rhyme creatures into a charmed circle, and then laments the fact that all this belongs to the past,but what remains is the charm,not the self-pity.Inother words the poem looks outward rather than inward,concentrates on its evocation of a pretty,polite, charming,twee world of creatures rather than on the speakers feelings on losing this.In these lines detailed nonsense invention takes precedence over the expression of feeling,so that the reader can supply his own regret that the birds can no longer sing " Tilly-loo " and the mice can no longer dance in their tea-cup,and is not asked simply to share Lear's feelings.This is the value of nonsense; by providing Lear with an enormous field for sheer invention,it enabled him to approach the world sideways, as it were,something his serious contemporaries could not do.

For all that,Calico Pie is not one of Lear's very best poems,while

The Quangle Wangle's Hat definitely is.The Quangle Wangle first appears as the children's peculiar companion in The Story of the Four Little Children,but Lear apparently found him interesting enough to have a poem of his own.The opening stanza gives all the information about him needed to start with,and so is worth quoting in its entirety :

> On the top of the Crumpetty Tree
> The Quangle Wangle sat,
> But his face you could not see,
> On account of his Beaver Hat.
> For his hat was a hundred and two feet wide,
> With ribbons and bibbons on every side
> And bells,and buttons,and loops,and lace,
> So that nobody ever could see the face
> Of the Quangle Wangle Quee.

In the illustrations of the nonsense story,the Quangle Wangle is very emaciated to say the least,and is almost always seen concealed behind something,with only enough visible to let the viewer know that he is there.One suspects that this was for reasons explained to the children for whom the story was written,but impossible to discover for anyone else; in any case,Lear seems to have felt that this concealment,though originally no doubt part of the nonsense game,had some significance worth investigating.It would be easy to see the hat as a symbol of the persona of easy-going clown built up by Lear himself,behind which no-one can see his true nature,and certainly it is noteworthy that the concealment,originally effected by anything handy,is now the result of an object of personal adornment,in fact of exaggerated adornment,with its ribbons,bells,buttons,and lace.There is an undeniable sense of a role assumed in order to appear attractive to others,but which becomes an impenetrable screen between the real self and others.

This sort of view seems to be reinforced by the second stanza, in which the hero reflects that few people ever pass his way,and,in typical Lear understatement " life on the whole is far from gay ".But

it is not necessary to go quite so far,and the poem perhaps benefits from a rather broader interpretation.The Quangle Wangle is lonely,that is clear,because nobody ever came his way,and,it is added irrelevantly and perhaps contradictorily,because no-one could see his face; his concealment,part of the original nonsense invention,has been expanded to include isolation as well,but it is not made clear if this is a result, or merely an adjoining circumstance.This whole problem about the nature of his loneliness is added to when it is alleviated.Mr. and Mrs. Canary come along,admire the hat,and decide that it is the ideal spot to build a house,and it is emphasized that they ask the hero's permission with many flattering pleases,and generally give him and his hat a full measure of approval.They are followed by a procession of other animals,fully two stanzas long,who also " humbly beg / We may build our homes on your lovely Hat ",and the Quangle Wangle achieves his happiness in this, thinking to himself,in one of the best couplets Lear (or anyone else) ever wrote :

' When all these creatures move
' What a wonderful noise there'll be ! '

So the friends are attracted by the " lovely " hat,which also conceals the Quangle Wangle,and even when,at the end, " all were as happy as happy could be ", the Quangle Wangle's own happiness is the happiness of a proud host,rather than as a member of the community as such.

The poem illustrates the emotional complexities contained in the nonsense world,which only require the setting of a long,coherently expressive lyric to become apparent.While one can,as I have suggested, explain these by looking for similar conflicts in the life of the author (and this would not be hard), I think that it must first be admitted that the nonsense exists primarily in its own terms,and is to be understood by analogy from larger life rather than by direct explanation.

The sort of analogy needed must help clarify the complex emotional flavour of the poem,rather than explain its genesis.Hence the Quangle Wangle is like a man who has never had children,but is able to please them,and as a result they flock around him,and he is enable to enjoy their vitality,the " wonderful noise " they make - and in fact his feelings do seem markedly protective and paternal.Or he is like someone who isolates himself from others,and spends his time on private projects, while secretly hoping that others will greatly admire the results of these,and love him for it.Or again he is like an observer,who takes his pleasure in a mixture of company and scenery (the animals constitute both).And no doubt there are many other aspects to his situation of feeling.What matters however is the resolution : two stanzas are spent in describing those who flock to the hat,and they include the Pobble and the Dong from other poems.The Quangle Wangle is offering them, and himself simultaneously,haven,the kind of perfect selfless oneness that the owl and the pussycat share,and their pleasure in this community is exactly like his own entranced delight in their presence, in the diversity and marvellousness of their being :

' When all these creatures move,
' What a wonderful noise there'll be ! '

This was probably the last nonsense lyric to be written of those Lear himself published,and like The Owl amd the Pussycat,it ends with a happy dance by the light of the moon,and as the first of the nonsense songs found the emotional secrets,so to speak,of the nursery rhyme dealing with animal marriages,so this poem treats the nursery rhymes involving joyful gatherings,like Girls and boys,come out to play. This is the poems clearest and most essential aspect,the free joyful gathering, joyful for both the participants,and,as with the dancing mice of Calico

Pie,the observer,that is,the Quangle Wangle,or the author,or the reader. But this latter factor indicates the additional complexity made inevitable by the inclusion of a central figure,such as neither The Owl and the Pussycat nor Calico Pie,the Quangle Wangle,who,by an unpredictable piece of nonsense invention,becomes the hero,with his problematic hat,of a poem which might otherwise have been a straightforward nonsense world version of loving community,a simple idyll,as is the first nonsense song.But from the hat arise,as I have suggested,all kinds of difficulties. And this is the essence of the poem.It is like a review of the nonsense world,gathering as many of its creatures together as possible,demonstrating their happiness with the Quangle Wangle,on his hat,whose function of protection has been oddly extended to those who are on it,and which both attracts these creatures to it,and hides its wearer from them.And this contradiction seems accidental : though the hero looks forward to the noise they will make,they are said to dance on the leaves of the tree - as if to conceal the Quangle Wangle's continued concealment.And he says not one word to his guests,he speaks only to himself.All of these contradictions are inherent in the material Lear is using,combining the happy fantasy of the early nonsense rhymes with the complex central figure, as found in the later.The logic of it does not work; the animals can achieve perfect community,but the Quangle Wangle can only remain lonely, and may only admire them from a distance,as they admire his hat.But this is wishful thinking,because in the nonsense world,there would be no need for such a focal point,or for the Quangle Wangle,and yet it is his poem,about him.If the heart of the poem is its evocation of the marvellous variety of the world through the nonsense medium " What a wonderful noise,etc ",its soul,so to speak,is the complex problem of how an individual can relate himself to this happy life,since he cannot, by definition,be part of it.The Quangle Wangle's hat itself,rather than

being a symbol for anything,is Lear's attempt to solve,in nonsense terms,this problem,as it it presents itself in the course of nonsense invention.The animals must rally round the Quangle Wangle,and make him happy in his loneliness; why would they do this ? Because he posesses a hat,protective,like all hats,and protective towards all of them,hence, by typical nonsense process of making things " concrete and fastidious ", an enormous hat,or more precisely one 102 feet wide,a hat moreover that is " lovely ",that they will all admire,covered with ribbons and buttons and bells,in another concretizing,of its attractiveness.So equipped,they will beg him for a place,as if their happiness depended on him,rather than the other way around.

The poem is,on emotional terms,no solution,as can be seen from the numerous discrepancies,but in nonsense terms it is a charmingly intricate invention,and expresses the joy of the world-in-itself as poignantly as any of the nonsense,even if it fails to integrate this with the nonsense treatment of personal life,as in The Dong,or the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo.Those two poems are sad ones,as is the similar Daddy Long-legs and the Fly,and even The Pobble Who Has No Toes is a poem of defeat,in sharp contrast to the unmitigated joy of The Jumblies and the Owl and the Pussycat,which do not touch on such matters.Lear seems to have wished to create a nonsense figure as touching as The Dong, yet create a poem of triumph and delight of the simplest kind,not the sad eternity of the daddy long-legs and the fly.This attempt failed, because of the nature of things,but still resulted in one of Lear's most haunting songs.

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(1) The Indian Journal, quoted in Noakes, Edward Lear, p 261.

(2) Bowra, The Romantic Imagination, p 280.

Part Four : The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-tongs, and the two parts of Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos.

These two poems represent the final,and perhaps the poorest, aspect of Lear's nonsense verse,the nonsense satire,as one might call it; two other poems in this vein, Mr. and Mrs. Spikky Sparrow and The Broom,the Shovel,the Poker and the Tongs,are,with their paucity of nonsense invention and their rather obvious " comedy of manners ",undoubtedly the least interesting things that Lear published.The two poems I will deal with in this section are rather better,though by no means Lear's best work.The first of the two belongs to a rather irritating group of three poems in the 1871 volume, Nonsense Songs,etc,which,taking the hint from nursery rhymes like the one in which the dish runs away with the spoon,bring various domestic objects to life and have them run through various antics.The titles,and hence the heroes,of these poems are The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-tongs, The Broom,the Shovel,the Poker and the Tongs,and The Table and the Chair.I imagine that this conceit probably struck Lear as an appealing one,and he turned out the three poems in quick succession; if so,The Nutcrackers and the Sugar-tongs must have been the first,since it is the least tiresome by far,and contains some invention of interest,while the other two would profit by being reduced to four-line nursery rhymes.

This poem is another version of Lear's favourite plot of escape,and indefinite voyages away from restricting circumstances and people.Like the duck and kangaroo,the pair of implements leave their dull circumstances behind for endless travel,and like the Jumblies,they do this to the consternation of the ordinary people,or rather implements

who surround them.The nutcrackers suggests to the sugar-tongs that it would be pleasant

> ' Along the blue hills and green meadows to ride ?
> ' Must we drag on this stupid existence for ever,
> ' So idle,so weary,so full of remorse...
> ' Don't you think we could ride without being instructed ?
> ' Without any saddle,or bridle,or spur ? '

So the pair jump on horses and escape,amid hysterical scences of rage, confusion and disbelief from those who remain behind :

> The plates and the dishes looked out of the casement,
> The salt-cellar stood on his head with a shout,
> The spoons with a clatter looked out of the lattice,
> The mustard-pot climbed up the gooseberry-pies,

They ride around town, " to the beautiful shore " and ever onwards, " and they never came back ".Now the theme is obvious enough,and so are certain emotional attitudes.Unlike the others dealing with similar themes of escape,this poem dwells very much on the rage of those left behind,which is clearly shock at a breach of convention,a feeling that such a thing is indescribably wicked and wrong,and in this we see the would-be escapee motivated by the thought of the stir he will cause, the shock and horror,how thoroughly he will be the centre of attention. This element is underplayed in The Jumblies and The Pobble Who Has No Toes, which rather emphasise the adventure that draws the escapee on,and in The Jumblies,the things of real value that are gained,and that in the end are admired even by those who tut-tutted the foolhardy venture.Here it is the clatter and commotion of the escape itself that occupies the stage,and this means inevitably that a kind of highly generalized social satire evolves,the poem mocking respectable bourgeois both by turning them into kitchen implements at all,and then having them act out the comical outrage that has the soup-ladle,in Victorian ladies fashion,peep out from behind the veal patties,and give out " A ladle-like scream of surprise " - the sort of outrage that anyone would

enjoy causing who has ever suffered embarrassment for slight breaches of convention.

However the conversion of all this into nonsense is very half-hearted,and even the central passages describing the farcical scenes of shocked surprise strike one as exaggerated caricature,with Dickensian nature-names exchanged for the names of household gear or goods,a rather poor joke at that.There is very little independent nonsense,apart from this one simple conceit,and even that seems mostly useful as a mechanism, as a way of enabling the escape to take place in a clear and satisfying manner by a trick so simple as jumping on horses,and just riding off into the blue; the assumption is that anyone could do it,and live in bliss,but these prisoners of unimaginative convention are unable to bring themselves to do it.This is not a very satisfying version of the " escape Myth",if the phrase can be excused,since it is not only far too easy,stripped of any suggestion of the difficulties of breaking away from any established way of living,however stultifying,but also mocks the other characters far too easily,and directs little of this mockery at the heroes.It is,in other words,too unambivalent,and this makes it unconvincing as a poem,even,apparently to its author,since he was unable to come up with any better suggestion of nonsense paradise than " the beautiful shore ",which simply trades on the accumulated force of the adjective in the cheap manner of bad Romantic poetry.

Mr. and Mrs. Discobbolos frames itself in similar terms of displaced adult satire,but it is a far better poem,full of nonsense, as for instance the couple's charming name,and possessed of a far more appealing,and far blacker,vein of satire,representing a frenzied and gleeful annihilation of the Victorian family.The poem is in two parts; in the first, Mr.and Mrs. Discobbolos climb to the top of a wall to watch the sunset,and hear the cries of the Nupiter Piffkin and the

Biscuit Buffalo,and it occurs to Mrs. Discobbolos that they might fall, and she reproaches her husband for deciding to climb up.He answers that, rather than take the risk of climbing down again,they will stay on the wall for ever,on which they both break into song celebrating their new-found bliss,free from the cares and necessities of the world on top of their wall :

' From the worry of life we've fled -
' Oh ! W! X! Y! Z!
' There is no more trouble ahead. '

In the second part,the couple are seen again after twenty years,when their teeth are beginning to fall and they have twelve children evenly divided.Mrs. Discobbolos begins to worry about her children's lack of social opportunities,since,never having been down from the wall,they will find it hard to meet marriage partners; Mr. Discobbolos doesn't take kindly to this idea,but digs a trench under the wall,fills it with explosives and sings,

' Let the wild bee sing
' And the blue bird hum !
' For the end of your lives has certainly come ! '

and then lights the fuse,on which,

All the Discobbolos family flew
In thousands of bits to the sky so blue,

and that is that.The Owl and the Pussycat was Lear's first nonsense song,and it would be nice if this was his last (it wasn't),because it is at the opposite pole of feeling.The earlier poem gives a vision of perfect idyllic happiness,entirely free of the entanglements of real life : there is simply no possibility of that couple having a marital quarrel.The later poem is Lear's blackest in its material,though there is no sadness in it,only laughter at the whole course of life,and though it,too,presents an escape from the suffocations of the world,it turns out,in the end,to be Lear's most drastic version of excape.In the beginning,the harmony between the couple seems assured,with both agreeing

on the idyllic wall-top life in spite of its eremitical disadvantages, but when his wife turns out to be an ordinary woman with ordinary social aspirations (she worries that her offspring have never " heard folks say in a tone all hearty / What loves of girls (at a garden party) / Those Misses Discobbolos are ") the disillusioned Mr. Discobbolos simply ends it all for all of them,in an irritated gesture that clears his life of all annoyances that result from biological process,including, incidentally,himself.The reason for this reaction is clear enough, added to the suggestion that the couple are now disgustingly old,all their hair is beginning to grey,teeth falling out,and the whole business of domesticity and child-rearing has turned out a horrible bore quite unlike the dream of wall-top life : the poem is like an epigram by Oscar Wilde rather over-obviously turning a sentimental Victorian value upside down.However the nonsense remains more important than the satire, and the poem is full of excellent bits and pieces,like Mr. Discobbolos' little song,or the charming blandness of the explosion scene.Because there are definite satirical implications,Lear seems for once to be giving a version of real life,in spite of the convincing nonsense paraphenalia,but the atmosphere of nonsensical nursery rhyme is very strong,recalling the rhyme about Peter Pumpkineater,or the Old Woman who lived in a shoe,and this tends to give an impression,unique in Lear, of the fusing of the real and nonsense worlds,since the former is being seen in a cynical light that makes it,too,the sort of grotesque and arbitrary nonsense found in nursery rhymes.Here we see the influence of nursery rhyme exercising its most liberating effect on Lear,enabling him to be ruthless in the pusuit of comical and nonsensical ideas, regardless of sentiment,and to parody his heroes,sitting on the wall, romantically watching the sunset with " a roll and some Camomile tea / and both were as happy as happy can be ". The poem is not quite pure

nursery rhyme,however;rather it mocks the ideals of happiness that were set up,in nonsense form,in other poems,converting nonsense into further nonsense as it were,showing that the only real way to escape from all the snares of life is to blow the whole lot up,like the irate Mr. Discobbolos,destroying all the sexual and social needs and all the annoyances of other people at a fell swoop.

The poem is one of Lear's funniest and most appealing,because it combines the complexity,excellent prosody and wealth of inventive detail of the nonsense songs with the ruthlessness and quirkiness of the limericks; it is a satire of the Victorian family as violent and amoral as Mr. Discobbolos action,but even more than that it is sheer farce,depicting people as solid objects who can " fall down flumpetty / Just like pieces of stone ",and,without malice at self or others, quite unconcernedly making use of the nonsensical aspects even of those things that Lear himself valued greatly to add to the farce.It is the triumph of nonsense invention over tender feeling,demonstrating the priority of the former in the human mind,and hence perhaps shows Lear in a less characteristic light than the poems of greater sentiment, but nonetheless sums up one side of his work quite well.

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